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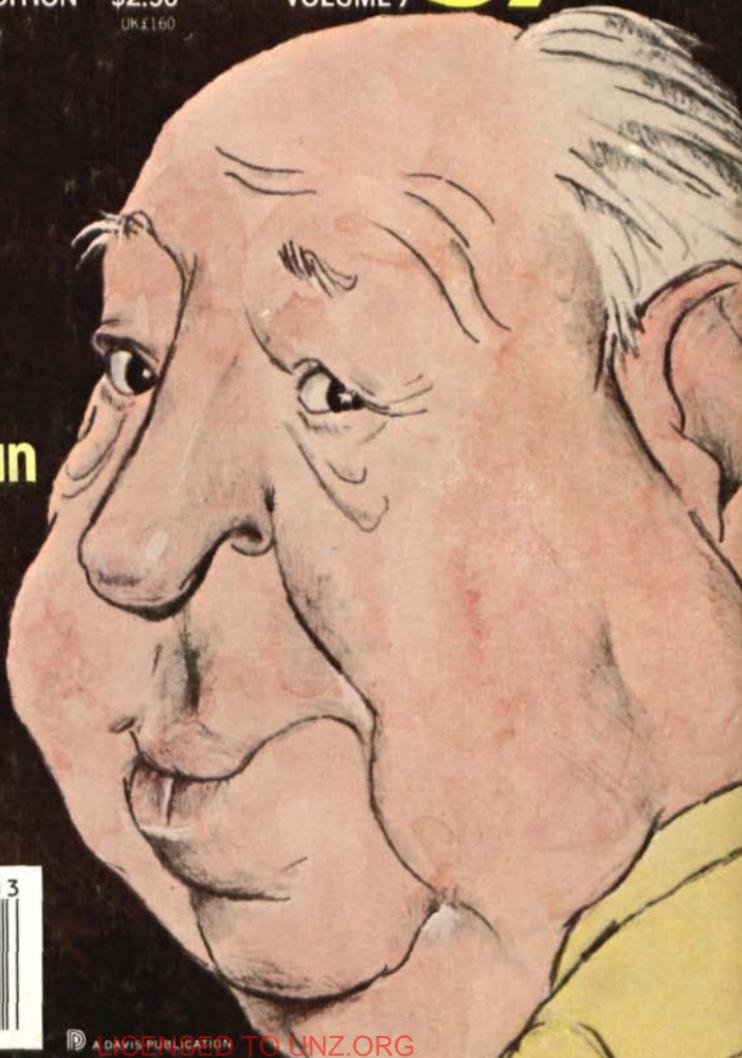
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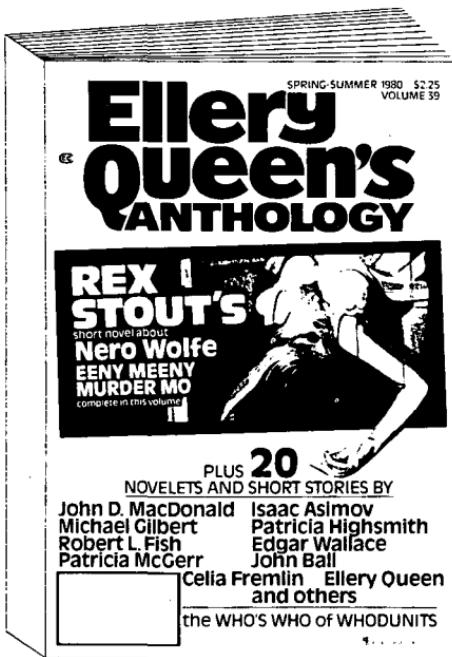
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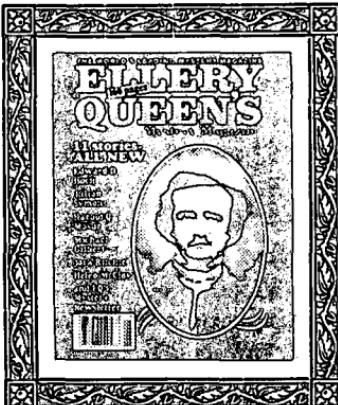
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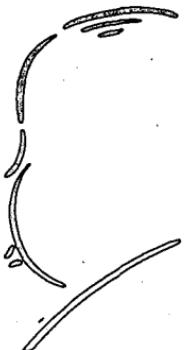
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Alfred

Hitchcock's Anthology

VOLUME 7



Edited by

ELEANOR SULLIVAN

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Introduction

In reading this seventh anthology in the new series of Alfred Hitchcock anthologies you will undoubtedly experience some inner disquietude, a certain lack of ease in your usual, normal surroundings. The attitudes and actions of many of the so-called human beings you will encounter in these pages will make you look at spouse and sibling, stranger and friend with unaccustomed suspicion and dread.

This reaction from you was carefully planned, in cold blood, with malice aforethought, by the 28 authors who brought these characters to such ferocious, passionate, sinister life. I confess to my role in the scheme with no small elation. But that shouldn't surprise you. No one could ever accuse me of saying, Never fear, Alfred Hitchcock is here.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alfred Hitchcock". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Alfred" on the top line and "Hitchcock" on the bottom line, both slightly slanted to the right.

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The Ring with the Velvet Ropes

by Edward D. Hoch

For the better part of his twenty-seven years, Jim Figg had been preparing for that night. He'd fought his way through a disheartening maze of amateur bouts before turning professional, then scored six knockouts in a row to attract the attention of even the most jaded pros. Under normal circumstances, he would have had a championship bout with Anger when he was twenty-five, but the delays and hassles over a contract and a site had effectively held things up for almost two years.

In the meantime, Big Dan Anger had easily disposed of three lesser heavyweights, and Jim knew from the moment of weigh-in that morning that the champion considered him another pushover. The gamblers and Vegas odds-makers thought a bit more of Jim Figg's record of knockouts and made him only a two-to-one underdog.

The dressing room before the fight was crowded with well-wishers and casual friends, and Jim had to listen to endless conversation before his trainer finally chased them all away. All, that is, except Connie Claus, sports editor of the city's leading morning paper.

Connie was a little man with white hair and a perpetual smile, who knew everything about sports and never stopped showing off his knowledge. His column went out on syndication to twenty-two newspapers, so most people listened politely when he spoke.

Now, straddling a chair while he cleaned the crusted bowl of his pipe, Connie Claus asked, "What do you think, Jim? Can you take the Champ?"

"I can take him," Jim said.

"You're a good fighter, boy. You've got a great name to live up to, though. Jim Figg—the *first* Jim Figg—was the earliest of the bare knuckle heavyweight champions. He held the title in England from 1719 to 1734."

"I know," Jim replied. In fact, he'd first read it in Connie's column more than a year before.

"Imagine! That was even before Broughton's rules went into effect."

"Yes." Jim stepped into the shower and turned on the water, momentarily drowning out the columnist's words. All right, he decided. Two hours from now it would be all over. If he won the fight—as he knew he would—he'd be the heavyweight champion of the world. For that, he could listen to Connie Claus's ramblings a bit longer.

"How's your girl?" Connie asked him as he emerged from the shower. "You gonna marry her?"

"Sue? I just might ask her if I win tonight."

"Can I use that in the column?"

Jim gave him a grin. "Wait till after the fight."

The little columnist was silent while Jim's trainer taped his hands. But finally, thoughtfully, he drew on his pipe and asked, "Ever hear any talk about another champion, Jim? Someone besides Big Dan?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. It's crazy, I suppose, but you hear things in my business."

Jim grunted and flexed the muscles of his right arm. He was feeling good. "If there's somebody else wants a crack at the title. . . ."

"You don't understand what I mean, Jim. Some people say Big Dan Anger's not the champ—that he never was the champ."

Jim snorted and held out his hands as the gloves were slipped on. "Who in hell is, then?" He was just making conversation. His mind was already in the ring with Anger.

"Have you heard the name Blanco? Roderick Blanco?"

"Wasn't there a lightweight named Blanco in Chicago a few years back?"

Connie Claus shook his head. "This is a different one."

"Well, who is he?"

The columnist shrugged. "No one knows. If I knew anything more about it, I'd do a column. The name was mentioned by a retired referee one night when he was drunk. He sobered up and wouldn't say a word about it. But stories get started."

"Let's go!" Max, the trainer, said. "Enough gabbing for now."

Connie stood up and waved a hand. "I'll be watching. Good luck—Champ."

"Thanks," Jim said with a smile and stepped into the dim outer corridor that led up to the arena. This was his night, his moment. Even Connie knew it.

There was a great roar from the unseen crowd, and Max put a hand

on his shoulder. The seconds and others clustered around as they halted a moment at the arena entrance. Former champions were being introduced—Clay and Liston and Patterson and someone else—and each name brought a renewed roar from the crowd.

Then it was Jim Figg's turn. He walked steadily down the aisle as the crowd's approval built to a shattering ovation. Big Dan had never been a popular champion, and the people had come to see him lose. Jim climbed through the ring ropes, the sweaty male odor of the previous fighters assaulting his nostrils.

Big Dan Anger always entered the ring late, and the chanting and foot stamping had already begun when he strode into view, a towering hulk of a man who'd been the heavyweight champion of the world for two and a half years. He looked more like a wrestler than a boxer, with close-cropped black hair and deep-set eyes that seemed constantly sleepy outside the ring.

The referee spoke quickly to the two men, running over the rules they both knew by heart. Then, with a suddenness that never failed to surprise Jim, the bell sounded and the crowd hushed momentarily—only to explode into shouting again as Big Dan landed his first blow to Jim's shoulder.

The fight went well for two rounds, with Jim circling and dancing, getting in a few good blows for points. He figured the first round as a draw and the second round probably his. At the beginning of the third, the champion was sweating, and Jim managed to open a little cut over one eye. Then he took a hard right to the jaw that shook him, staggering him against the ropes as Anger moved in for the kill.

The lights were a blur for an instant as Jim slid along the ropes and waited for the blow that would finish him. Then, somehow, his vision cleared. He blocked Big Dan's descending right glove and followed through with a right and a left of his own. The champion, caught by surprise, staggered backward and started to topple. Jim landed one more blow to send him on his way and then retreated to a neutral corner.

Big Dan Anger tried to rise at the count of seven, but his legs wouldn't respond. The referee counted him out on his knees, and the crowd went wild.

Jim Figg was the heavyweight champion of the world.

Back in the dressing room, the shouts of admirers ringing in his ears, Jim stretched out on the rubbing table while Max and the others went

to work on him. He felt tired but with the power of accomplishment growing somewhere within him. He had done it, for Sue and Max and Connie Claus and all the rest who had believed in him.

"Message for you, Champ," Max said, passing him an envelope from the door.

"Somebody else congratulating me." Jim ripped open the envelope and stared down at the message. *You are invited to meet Mr. Roderick Blanco*, it said. *A car will call for you tomorrow evening.*

"What in hell's this?" Jim said, tossing it aside.

The corridor door opened under the pressure of the crowd and Big Dan Anger hurried in, already in his street clothes. He seemed somehow smaller, deflated, vulnerable. "It was a good fight, kid," he mumbled. "You deserved to win."

"Thanks, Dan."

"Can I sneak out your back door? Claus is after me for an interview."

"Sure. Go ahead." Then Jim's eye caught the message he'd discarded, and he remembered Connie Claus's earlier words. "Dan, tell me something—who is Roderick Blanco?"

Anger's face seemed to freeze at the name. He stared down at Jim for a moment and then answered, "You'll find out, kid. You'll find out soon enough."

Jim Figg slept most of the following day, and when he finally awoke sometime after noon, it was to see the sports section of the newspaper propped up at the foot of the bed. **FIGG FLOORS ANGER FOR CHAMPIONSHIP!** the headline screamed, and there was a half-page picture of him landing his final blow to Big Dan's jaw. Jim smiled and rolled over in bed, feeling good all over. Maybe tonight he'd ask Sue to marry him.

He made a few phone calls and talked to not a few reporters and began that afternoon to discover the price of sudden fame. A weekly television show wanted him to appear the following Sunday evening, a newsmagazine wanted a portrait for their cover; suddenly everybody wanted something from him.

He decided to eat alone and pick up Sue afterward. It was on the way to her house that the sleek black sedan appeared from somewhere and edged his car to the curb. He climbed out, fists balled, and faced two men he'd never seen before. They were young and well built, but he knew he could take them both with ease.

"You boys need some driving lessons," he told them.

"We have Mr. Blanco's car. You were forgetting your engagement with him."

Something—could it be fear?—ran down Jim's spine. "I don't know any Blanco. I have an appointment."

"You have one, all right. With Roderick Blanco."

Jim took a step forward, and the nearest one slipped a small revolver from his pocket. They weren't kidding. Whatever this was, it was the real thing.

They drove for a long time, across the state line, coming finally to a walled estate somewhere near the ocean. Jim was led inside, to a high-ceilinged drawing room where a handsome young woman waited. She had long dark hair and was wearing an evening gown that sparkled when the light hit it.

"Good evening, Mr. Figg," she said, speaking the words clearly but with just the trace of an accent. "I'm so glad you could join us."

"It wasn't through choice. What is all this, anyway?"

She ignored the question. "I'm Sandra Blanco. My husband will be joining us shortly. Could I get you a drink in the meantime?"

"A little Scotch might taste good." He watched her walk to the side-board and found himself admiring her hips beneath the tight red hostess gown. "I hope you and your husband know the penalty for kidnapping," he said.

"Oh, come now! That's much too strong a word for it. You could walk out of this house right now if you wanted to."

"And walk all the way back to the city too, I suppose. Anyway, people are going to notice I'm missing quickly enough. I'm sorta newsworthy these days, you know."

"I saw the fight on television," she said, returning with the drink. "You have a wonderfully developed body."

"I could probably say the same for you. Aren't you drinking?"

She smiled down at him. "I'll wait till my husband joins us." She lit a cigarette. "You know, you're very different from the others."

"Others?"

"Other fighters. Other champions. You seem quite . . . educated."

"I've been around. I started boxing in college, actually. Never graduated, though." The drink was good and Sandra Blanco was quite charm-

ing, but he was growing restless. "Just where is your husband, anyway?" he asked finally.

A deep, powerful voice behind him said, "Right here, Mr. Figg. Sorry for the delay."

Jim got to his feet and faced the newcomer. Roderick Blanco was a dark-haired young man of perhaps thirty. He had the broad shoulders and massive chest of a fighter, and for the first time Jim began to wonder if there was any thread of truth in what Connie Claus had been hinting at. "Maybe you can explain all this," Jim said, purposely not shaking hands.

"Didn't you get my message after the fight?" Blanco tilted his head a bit to one side as he spoke, almost as if listening to some far-off sound.

"I got it."

Blanco turned to his wife. "Leave us alone, please, Sandra." She left the room without a word, apparently used to being ordered about. Blanco watched her go and then turned back to Jim. "My invitation to you here was in the nature of a challenge," he said.

"A challenge?"

Roderick Blanco smiled thinly. "I am the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. The real champion."

"That's crazy. Counting television, probably twenty million people saw me beat Anger last night."

The smile didn't change. "For your information, Mr. Figg, I knocked out Big Dan Anger in thirty-five seconds of the fifth round. This happened more than two years ago—to be exact, on the fourth evening that he held the championship."

"You expect me to believe that? Where was the fight held? Who witnessed it?"

"It was held in this house, in the basement. The referee was a professional—now retired—who was well paid for his services. I can show you his signed statement, if you wish, and also a document signed by Anger after the fight." The broad shoulders moved beneath his smoking jacket. "I have defeated every heavyweight champion for the past ten years." There was a note of pride in his voice as he spoke, and somehow Jim knew it was true.

"But *why*? Why this secret business? Why kidnap me at gunpoint?"

Roderick Blanco walked the length of the room, then turned and started back. There was a strange sparkle in his eyes, like that of a small boy on

his way to a ball game. "My father was the richest man in the state, Mr. Figg. Rich men's sons don't go in for professional boxing. When I tried a few fights in college, he almost threw me out of the house." He cocked his head a bit to one side. "Even today, his fortune is tied up in a trust fund until I'm thirty-five. If I should engage in professional boxing before that time, I lose everything."

"Fantastic!"

"My father was a fantastic man." Now he really seemed to be listening, perhaps to a voice only he could hear. "He died in an asylum. Cut his throat with a piece of chicken bone and died before the guards could reach him. But enough of my story—you must be anxious to see the ring!"

"I'm not going to fight you," Jim told him, not moving from his chair.

"But of course you are! Tomorrow evening! You'll be my guest until that time. You can even work out with one of the servants tomorrow if you wish, though. I imagine you're still in condition from last night's fight."

"If I refuse?"

"None of them ever refused."

"I'm refusing."

The dark-haired man spread his arms in a gesture of resignation. "Why, then, I'll just have to keep you here until you change your mind."

"Hold me prisoner, you mean? At gunpoint?"

"But it needn't be that way! The others were all willing to fight me! And afterward they returned to the public as if nothing had happened." He smiled at Jim ever so slightly. "No one will ever know that I have beaten you."

"And what if I win?"

"That has never happened."

Jim sat silently for a moment, weighing the possibilities. It was something of a challenge, and he had never been one to run away from a fight. Besides, fighting the man seemed the simplest way of gaining his freedom. "All right," he decided. "I'll fight you."

"Ah!" It was almost a sigh.

"But I'm expected in town tonight. I'll have to make a phone call."

"All right. But no tricks, please."

"No tricks."

Jim was hoping that Connie Claus would still be at the paper, writing

his morning column. He dialed the area code and then the familiar number; while Blanco stood at his side.

"Claus, please," he tried to mumble into the receiver when the switchboard answered.

After a moment's buzzing, Connie was on the line. "Claus here," he answered tonelessly, sounding bored or busy.

"Jim Figg, Connie."

"How are you, Champ?"

"Look, I can't keep our date for tonight."

"Huh?"

"Will you tell Max and Sue?"

"What are you talking about?"

Jim glanced into Blanco's deep brown eyes. "I'm spending a couple of days at the shore. With Snow White."

"Huh? What you talking about, Champ?"

Roderick Blanco's hand came down, breaking the connection. "That was foolish," he said. "White for Blanco. I doubt if he even understood you."

"I doubt it too," Jim agreed sadly.

"Don't try anything like that again."

"I only thought you might want somebody from the press here to witness the fight."

Blanco shook his head. "No one from the press."

"What about a referee?"

"That has been arranged. An older retired gentleman, no longer active in ring work, will be paid a good sum to referee the fight."

"And spectators?" Jim asked.

"Only my wife and my servants. As I said, it is a private affair. Now come, and I'll show you the ring."

He led Jim down a wide stairway to the basement, a surprisingly high-ceilinged room that was brilliantly lit by overhead fluorescent tubes. In the very center of the room was a regulation-size boxing ring, flanked by a single row of theater-type seats for spectators.

"The ring ropes are black," Jim observed.

"My one concession to good taste. The ropes are regulation, but they are covered in velvet."

"I see."

"Do you find it to your liking?"

"Sure. At least I won't have to worry about a lot of the crowd mobbing me in the ring afterward."

"There are few seats, to be sure, but every one is at ringside."

"Yeah."

Roderick Blanco held out his hand. "Then, until tomorrow evening? At eight?"

Jim shook his hand and watched the man walk quickly away toward the stairs. He wondered where he would spend the night, but almost immediately one of the servants was at his elbow. "You will come this way to your room, sir."

"Sure." He wondered if the man was armed, if he would shoot Jim at the first hint of an escape attempt. But he decided not to find out. He was going to stay and fight Roderick Blanco, because he was certain he could defeat the man.

Sleep did not come easily in the strange bed, and Jim pushed his head into the downy softness of the pillow and tried to free his mind of all thought. He was just beginning to drift off when his muscles tensed with the soft click of his door opening and closing. Someone had come into his room. His first thought was Blanco or one of his men, but as he rolled over about to spring at the intruder, a soft voice whispered, "Don't be alarmed. It's Sandra Blanco."

He sat up in bed, seeing her only vaguely in the near-total darkness. "Do you always visit men's rooms at midnight, Mrs. Blanco?"

"I had to talk to you before tomorrow. You . . . seem different from the others, somehow. I think you could beat him."

"I know I can beat him."

He felt the weight of her body suddenly sitting on the edge of his bed. "That's why I had to talk to you. *You must let him win!*"

"Why should I do that? Just so he can keep his foolish little secret championship?"

"You don't understand! I was afraid you wouldn't. My husband is . . . quite mad. If you win that fight tomorrow night, you'll never leave this house alive."

"Oh, come now!" Jim tried to snort in disbelief, but there was a cold shiver down his spine at her words.

"No, I'm serious! The others lost and they lived, because Roderick knew they'd never tell the story to anybody and thereby admit their

defeat. But if you should win the fight tomorrow, he would have nothing to assure your silence. And if you told the newspapers about it, he would not only be disgraced at losing, but he would lose his father's trust fund as well."

"But murder!"

"It would not be the first time. There was an old referee who worked the last fight—the one with Anger. He got drunk one night and talked, enough to start some rumors around the city. Roderick had him . . . run over by a car."

"You can't be serious!"

"But I am. If you win that fight tomorrow, he'll kill you."

Then, as quickly as she'd come, Sandra Blanco stood up and moved to the door. It opened and closed behind her, leaving him alone with the echo of her words.

When morning came, and Jim went down to breakfast, Roderick Blanco was nowhere in sight. Sandra Blanco dined with him, but there was no hint on her face of their midnight conversation.

"Where's your husband?" Jim asked, munching on a piece of toast.
"Will he be joining us?"

"You won't see him until tonight. He's working out, getting in condition for the fight."

"In just one day?"

"That's all he needs."

Jim sipped his orange juice, glancing out at the heavy autumn clouds that were drifting in over the beach. "How did you ever meet Blanco?" he asked.

She glanced at the servant hovering nearby and answered, "That's a long story, and I won't bore you with it. I always wanted security; you can see I have it here."

"Yes."

"He's very good to me, really." She stared down at the breakfast crumbs on her plate. "And who knows? There may not be another champion he has to fight for years. After tonight."

"After tonight," Jim repeated.

"Do you want to work out with a sparring partner or something?"

"I should get the feel of the ring," he said.

"I'll have one of the servants take care of you, show you the dressing

room and things." She left the table and went off into the depths of the large house.

Left alone at the table, Jim gazed out the window at the sea and suddenly realized the impossibility of the situation. Here, in the basement of a seaside mansion, he was going to fight a rich man's deranged son for the secret championship of the world! And if he won, he would be killed!

Jim rose from the table and walked quickly to the front door. The whole charade was just too ridiculous in the light of morning. He opened the door and started down the wide, curving driveway to the distant street. He was almost to the half-open gates when a voice called out, "Just a moment, Mr. Figg!"

It was one of the men who'd brought him there, and the gun was back in his hand. "You weren't thinking of leaving us, were you, Mr. Figg?"

Jim spent the rest of the day in the basement, resignedly punching and skipping rope. He went two quick rounds in the velvet-rope ring with one of the Blanco servants, easily flooring the man four times before calling it quits. There was about the whole affair an overhanging of unreality, as if at any moment an unseen director might end the play and call the whole thing off. Even the servants of Roderick Blanco contributed to the sense of unreality, moving through the endless corridors of the big house with frozen faces and soft-soled shoes.

"Will you be having dinner?" Sandra Blanco asked him late in the day.

"I never eat before a fight," he said. "Afterward, maybe."

She paused by the ring, staring up at him, and he almost thought she was about to say something else. But the moment passed and she was gone.

At seven-thirty some servants came to help him with the final preparations, and promptly at eight he was escorted into the big basement room with its velvet-rope ring. Sandra Blanco occupied one of the seats, and the various servants filled the others. There were perhaps twenty of them in all, including the two men who had brought him there.

He climbed between the ropes, feeling the increased beat of his heart. It was the old sense of chilly anticipation he'd known so many times before. Only this time it was a bit different. This time, in a way, the game was for keeps.

The room was silent with pause, waiting—and then all at once Roderick Blanco was striding across the floor to the ring, shedding his robe to a

handler as he walked. His massive chest was matted with curly black hair, and he wore dark blue trunks over firm thighs. In that moment, he looked like a champion.

He nodded to Jim and said, "Our referee," indicating a small balding man who'd followed them into the ring. "His name is Walters, and he handled two championship fights in the forties. Before your time."

The referee ran quickly through the standard rules of the bout, averting his eyes uncertainly from the participants, as if somehow doubting his own part in this affair. Then they stepped apart, returned to their corners, and waited until one of the servants acting as timekeeper rang the bell for round one.

Blanco moved out of his corner fast, keeping low, looking for an opening. Jim danced back a few steps, trying to figure the man's style, and realizing for the first time how difficult it was to fight someone he'd never seen before in the ring. They clenched quickly, and the referee pulled them apart. Jim landed a glancing blow on Blanco's shoulder, but the round ended without any damage to either man.

During the second round, Jim began to be bothered by the silence. He was used to the roar of a crowd, to the sweat and excitement of spectators' reactions to each blow landed. Here, before twenty people—all apparently on Blanco's side—the roar had shrunken to an occasional murmur, the excitement to the level of a few people watching a dull motion picture travelogue. It was almost as if the end were known, and perhaps to them it was.

He landed a firm right to Blanco's jaw during the closing seconds of the round and took up where he left off in the third. But Roderick Blanco could take an amazing amount of punishment without seeming to tire. They traded punches through two more rounds, and Jim was distressingly aware that the fight was pretty even at this point.

It was midway through the sixth round when Blanco unleashed his big guns, a rapid-fire series of blows that staggered Jim for the first time and finally drove him to his knees. With bloodied eyes he stared through the ring ropes at Sandra Blanco, saw her lips move as she told him to stay down. This was the moment he could do it. Stay down for a ten count and nobody would ever know. He was still the champion—why not let this madman have his moment of glory?

But then he was up as the count reached eight, ready to go at it again. Blanco gave him no chance but moved in for another fistic battering. This

time Jim went down flat. He was just wondering what the count was when he heard the bell ending the round.

At the beginning of the seventh, Jim knew it would take everything he had just to stay on his feet. Blanco was no phony. He was real championship material. They tussled evenly through the three minutes, and then Jim returned sagging to his stool. "How long did Dan Anger last against him?" Jim asked the second.

The man hesitated a moment and then replied. "Six rounds."

"Good. I'm lasting eight, anyway."

In the eighth, the end came quickly. Blanco moved in to finish Jim off, somehow deceived by his bloodied face. Jim still had one punch left, the punch he'd used on Anger two nights before. Blanco took it, went back against his velvet ropes, and came looking for more. Jim saw at once that the man's guard was down, his eyes dazed by the force of the punch. One, two, three more—and Roderick Blanco collapsed in the center of the ring, his face against the canvas. The referee had counted him out before he even began to stir.

Jim Figg was still the heavyweight champion of the world.

Later, after he'd taken off the gloves, showered, and dressed, Jim faced Blanco in the upstairs living room. There was a piece of tape over the dark man's left eye, and the right eye was blue with swelling. He stared hard at Jim and said quietly, "You're a good fighter."

"Thank you," Jim told him. "You were a strong opponent. Tougher than Anger, by far." He could afford to be generous with his words.

Blanco was wearing his dressing gown, and both hands were buried deep in the pockets. Sandra stood to one side, her face a pale mask of apprehension. "This is the first time I have ever lost," the dark-haired man said, almost sadly.

"Roderick . . ."

"Be quiet, Sandra," he told her. "Yes, the first time. And I bow to a superior boxer—a true champion."

Jim nodded uncertainly. "Then I'll be going now."

"Well," Blanco said slowly, "I'm afraid not. I'm afraid I can't allow you to leave this house and spread the word of your victory across every front page. No, no."

Sandra tried to step between them, but Blanco pushed her aside. His right hand appeared, holding a gun. "Run!" Sandra shouted to Jim.

But already the servants were blocking the door. Jim saw that there was no way out. He glared at the gun in Blanco's hand and wondered if it was all to end like this. "You'd kill me?"

"I must, to protect myself."

"I won't tell anyone."

"Not even your friend Claus?"

Sandra tried to run forward again, but one of the servants grabbed her and held her firm. Blanco's gun came up a fraction of an inch. Jim glanced at the window, wondering if he'd be fast enough to dive through it, knowing already that he wouldn't be.

"All right," he said. "Then shoot."

"I'm sorry," Blanco said, and his finger whitened on the trigger.

"One more thing," Jim said suddenly, talking fast.

"What is it?"

"Suppose I give you a return bout?"

Blanco hesitated, and his trigger finger relaxed every so slightly. "When?"

"Before I fight anybody else."

Silence. Then Roderick Blanco nodded slightly. "Very well. Do I have your word as a gentleman?"

"You have my word as a gentleman."

"And you will say nothing to the papers in the meantime?"

"Nothing."

Another nod. "All right. But if you go back on either promise, my servants will kill you. Quite painfully."

Jim gave a little bow as Blanco returned the gun to his pocket. "Then shall I say, until we meet again? In the ring with the velvet ropes?"

He turned and walked out of the house.

Two days later, Connie Claus joined Jim at a little table in the back room of a downtown bar. He was smiling like a newsman who scents a scoop. "You look good, Champ. How you feeling?"

"Great, Connie. Great."

"You said you had an exclusive for me." The little man leaned forward, resting his palms on the table. "You gonna tell me where you were for a couple of days? You gonna tell me about this Roderick Blanco?"

Jim merely smiled at him across the table. "No, I'm going to tell you that Sue and I are finally getting married."

"You called me down here just for that?"

"That, and to tell you I'm retiring from the ring."

"What?" Connie Claus stared at him unbelieving.

"I always intended to, when I got married. I'm going to open a little sporting goods store, I think."

"You're going to retire undefeated?"

"I already have. I notified the boxing commission an hour ago. I'm no longer the heavyweight champion of the world. The title is open."

Connie ran for the telephone, and Jim smiled as he signaled the waiter for another drink.

The telephone woke him the next morning, early. He rolled out of bed and went to answer it, thinking perhaps it would be Sue or even Max.

"Jim? This is Sandra Blanco."

"Oh? Hello."

"He killed himself two hours ago. He heard about your retirement on the late news last night, and he killed himself a few hours later."

"I'm sorry."

"Did you know he'd do it?"

"No," he answered honestly.

"It was just that he could never win the title back from you now. Even if he forced you to fight again, you're no longer the champion. You outwitted him."

"I kept my word," Jim told her.

"Yes, but . . ." Her voice was almost a sob.

"I'm sorry he's dead. That's all I can say." Then, for no reason at all, he asked, "How did he do it?"

"Downstairs, in the basement. He hanged himself with one of those velvet ropes."



Pattern of Guilt

by Helen Nielsen

Keith Briscoe had never been a hating man. Disciplined temper, alert mind, hard work—these were the things that made for success as a police reporter, and in the fourteen years since he'd returned from overseas, too big for his old suits and his old job as copy boy, Keith Briscoe had become one of the best. Enthusiasm was a help—something close to passion at times, for that was the stuff brilliance was made of—but not hatred. Hatred was a cancer in the mind, a dimness in the eye. Hatred was an acid eating away the soul. Keith Briscoe was aware of all these things, but he was becoming aware of something else as well. No matter how hard he forced the thought to the back of his mind, he knew that he hated his wife. And the thought was sharp, clear.

It was Sergeant Gonzales' case—burglary and murder. Violet Hammerman, 38, lived alone in a single apartment on North Curson. She worked as a secretary in a small manufacturing plant from Monday through Friday, played bridge with friends on Saturday night, served on the Hostess Committee of her church Sunday morning and died in her bed Sunday night (Monday morning, to be exact, since it was after 2:00 A.M. when the crime occurred) the victim of one bullet through her heart fired at close range. Sergeant Gonzales was a thorough man, and by the time Keith Briscoe reached the scene, having responded with firehorse reflexes to the homicide code on his short-wave receiver, all of these matters, and certain others, were already established and Gonzales was waiting for the police photographer to complete his chores so the body could be removed to the morgue.

She wasn't a pretty woman. A corpse is seldom attractive.

"You can see for yourself," Gonzales said. "It's a simple story. No struggle, no attempted attack—the bedclothes aren't even disturbed. The neighbors heard her scream once and then the shot came immediately afterward. She should have stayed asleep."

She was asleep now. Nothing would ever rouse her again. Briscoe glanced at the bureau drawer that was still standing half-open. One nylon stocking dangled forlornly over the side. He fingered it absently and then, without touching the wood, stuffed it inside.

"Fingerprints?" he asked.

"No fingerprints," Gonzales said. "The killer must have worn gloves, but he left a pair of footprints outside the window."

There was only one window in the small bedroom. It was a first-floor apartment in one of the old residential houses that had been rezoned and remodeled into small units, but still had a shallow basement and a correspondingly high footing. Violet Hammerman must have felt secure to sleep with her one window open and the screen locked, but that had been a mistake. The screen had been neatly cut across the bottom and up as far as the center sash on both sides. It now hung like a stiffly starched curtain, that bent outward at the touch of Keith Briscoe's hand.

"Port of entry and exit."

"That's right," Gonzales said. "But the exit was fast. He must have made a running jump out of the window and landed on the cement drive. It was the entry that left the prints. Collins, shoot your flash under the window again."

Collins was the man in uniform who stood guarding the important discovery beneath the window. He responded to Gonzales' order by pointing a bright finger of light down on the narrow strip of earth that separated the house from the driveway. It was a plot barely eighteen inches wide, but somebody had worked it over for planting, and because of that a pair of footprints were distinctly visible on the soft earth.

"We're in luck," Gonzales explained. "The landlord worked that ground yesterday morning. Set out some petunia plants—ruffled petunias. Too bad. A couple of them will never bloom."

A couple of them were slightly demolished from trampling, but between the withered green the two indentations were embedded, like an anonymous signature. Briscoe shoved the screen forward and peered farther out of the window.

"It must be nearly six feet to the ground," he remarked.

"Sixty-eight inches," Gonzales said.

"The footprints don't seem very deep."

"They aren't—no heels. If you were down where Collins is, you'd see what I saw a few minutes before you walked in. Those prints are from

rubber-soled shoes, 'sneakers' we used to call them when I was a kid. At closer view you can pick up the imprint of some of the tread, but not much. Those particular soles were pretty well worn. But you're thinking, Briscoe, as usual. That earth is soft. We'll have to measure the moisture content to get an idea of how much weight stood above those prints to make them the depth they are, but at first guess I'd say we're looking for a tall, slender lad."

"A juvenile?" Briscoe asked.

"Why not? Like I told my wife when she came home from her shopping trip last week, no wonder so many kids are going wrong. They come home from school and find their mothers dressed up in a sack with a belt at the bottom. That's enough to drive anyone out on the streets."

Keith Briscoe pulled his head in out of the window and ran a searching hand over the cut screen. It was a clean job. A sharp blade of a pocket knife could do the job. Gonzales could be right about the juvenile angle.

"You sound like a detective," he said.

"Gee, thanks," Gonzales grinned. "Maybe I'll grow up to be a hot reporter some day. Who can tell."

There was no sarcasm in the exchange. Gonzales and Briscoe had been friends long enough to be able to insult one another with respect and affection. Gonzales had a good mind and an eye for detail. He also had imagination, which was to building a police case what mortar is to a bricklayer.

"We found a purse—black felt—on the driveway near the curb," he added. "People in the building identified it as belonging to the deceased. There's no money in it except some small change in the coin purse, but there's this that we found on the top of the bureau—"

Gonzales had a slip of blue paper in his hand. He handed it to Briscoe. It was the deduction slip from a company paycheck. After deductions, Violet Hammerman had received a check for \$61.56.

"Payday was Friday," Gonzales continued. "The landlord told me that. He knows because he's had to wait for his rent a few times. Violet Hammerman didn't have time to get to the bank Friday—she worked late—but she cashed her check at the Sav-Mor Market on Saturday." Gonzales had another slip of paper in his hand now. A long, narrow strip from a cash register. "When she bought groceries to the sum of \$14.82," he added.

There was such a thing as sounding too much like a detective. Briscoe returned the blue slip with a dubious expression. It was barely two-thirty.

Gonzales was a fast worker, but the markets didn't open until nine. But Gonzales caught the expression before he could fit it with words.

"I'm guessing, of course," he said quickly, "but I'm guessing for a reason. \$14.82 from \$61.56 leaves \$46.74. Assuming she spent a few dollars elsewhere and dropped a bill in the collection plate, we see that Violet Hammerman's killer escaped with the grand sum of \$40 or, at the most, \$45."

"A cheap death," Briscoe said.

"A very cheap death, and a very cheap and amateurish killer." Gonzales paused to glance at the slip of blue paper again, but it was no longer entirely blue. A red smear had been added to the corner. "What did you do, cut your hand on that screen?" he asked.

Briscoe didn't know what he was talking about, but he looked at his hand and it was bleeding.

"Better look in the bathroom for some mercurochrome," Gonzales said. "You could get a nasty infection from a rusty screen."

"It's nothing," Briscoe said. "I'll wash it off under the faucet when I get home."

"You'll wash it off under the faucet right now," Gonzales ordered. "There's the bathroom on the other side of the bureau."

Gonzales could be as fussy as a spinster. It was easier to humor him than to argue. The photographer was finished with the corpse now, and Briscoe pulled the sheet up over her face as he walked past the bed. A cheap death and a cheap way to wait for the ambulance. Violet Hammerman had lived a humble and inconspicuous life, but she might rate a conspicuous obituary if he could keep Gonzales talking. Of course, Violet Hammerman might not have approved of such an obituary, but she now belonged to the public.

"A cheap and amateurish killer," Briscoe said, with his hand under the faucet, "but he wore gloves, rubber-soled shoes, and carried a gun."

Leaning against the bathroom doorway, Gonzales rose to the bait.

"Which he fired too soon," he said. "That's my point, Briscoe. There's a pattern in every crime—something that gives us an edge on the criminal's weakness, and we know he has a weakness or he wouldn't be a criminal. It takes a mind, some kind of a mind, to plan a burglary; but it takes nerve to pull it off successfully. This killer is very short on nerve. One cry from the bed and he blazed away at close range. A professional wouldn't risk the gas chamber for a lousy forty bucks. Don't use that little

red towel. Red dye's no good for an open cut."

Gonzales, with an eye for detail even when his mind was elsewhere. Briscoe put the guest towel back on the rack. A silly looking thing—red with a French poodle embroidered in black. It seemed out of place in Violet Hammerman's modest bathroom. It was more the sort of thing Elaine would buy. Elaine. He thought of her and slammed the faucet shut so hard the plumbing pipes shuddered.

"A killer short on nerve, but desperate enough to break into a house," Briscoe recapitulated, his mind busy forcing Elaine back where she belonged. "A forty-dollar murder." And then he had what he was groping for, and by that time he could face Gonzales without fear of anger showing in his face. "Sounds like a hophead," he suggested.

Gonzales nodded sadly. "That's what I've been thinking," he said. "That's what worries me. How much of a joyride can he buy for so little fare? I only hope Violet Hammerman isn't starting a trend."

Among his other characteristics, Sergeant Gonzales was a pessimist, and Keith Briscoe couldn't give him any cheer. He had troubles of his own.

Judge Kermit Lacy's court hadn't changed in four years. The flag stood in the same place; the woodwork still needed varnishing; the chairs were just as hard. If the windows had been washed, the evidence was no longer visible. Courtrooms could be exciting arenas where combating attorneys fought out issues of life and death, but there was nothing exciting about a courtroom where tired old loves went to die, or to be exhumed for delayed post-mortem.

The dead should stay dead. The thought tugged at Keith Briscoe's mind when he saw Faye sitting at her attorney's table. Faye had changed in four years. She looked younger, yet more mature, more poised. She wore a soft gray suit and a hat that was smart without being ridiculous. There had never been anything ridiculous about Faye—that was the only trouble with her; she always carried with her the faint aura of Old Boston. She looked up and saw him then. And when their eyes met, there was a kind of stop on time for just an instant, an almost imperceptible shadow crossed her eyes, and then she smiled. Keith walked to the table. He didn't quite know what to do. Was it customary to shake hands with an ex-wife—the sort of thing tennis players do after vaulting the net? He kept his hands at his side.

"You're looking good, Faye," he said. "Great, in fact." Clumsy words, as if he were just learning the language. "Thank you," Faye responded. "You look well too, Keith. You've lost weight."

Keith started to say "No more home cooking" and thought better of it. And he didn't look well. It wasn't just because he'd been up most of the night delving into the violent departure of one Violet Hammerman from this vale of fears; it was because he had that depth-fatigue look of a man who's gradually working up to an extended hangover.

"I keep busy," he said.

"And how is Elaine?"

That question had to come. Keith searched in vain for a twinge of emotion in Faye's voice. There was none. Elaine was a knife that had cut between them a long time ago, and old wounds heal.

"Elaine's fine," he said, and then he couldn't be evasive any longer. "Faye—" The bailiff had entered the courtroom. In a few moments the judge would walk in and there would be no more time to talk. "—I wish you'd reconsider this action. We have a good arrangement now. If you take the boys east, I'll never get to see them."

"But that's not true," Faye objected. "They can visit with you on vacations."

"Vacations! A few weeks out of a year—that's not like every weekend!"

"Every weekend, Keith?" Faye's voice was soft, but her eyes were steady. Faye's eyes were always steady. "You've had four years of weekends to visit the boys. How many times have you taken advantage of them?"

"Every weekend I possibly could! You know how my job is!"

Faye knew. The half-smile that came to her lips had a sadness in it. Now that he really looked at her, Keith could see the sadness. She was lonely. She must be lonely, bringing up two boys with nothing but an alimony check for companionship. Now she was bringing suit for permission to take the boys east—ostensibly to enroll them in prep school; but Keith Briscoe suddenly knew the real reason.

There were old friends back east to wipe out the memories—perhaps even an old flame.

Keith felt a quick jab of pain he didn't understand.

"I'm going to fight you, Faye," he said. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to fight you every inch of the way."

It was nearly eight o'clock that night before Keith got home to his apartment. Nobody came to greet him at the door except Gus, Elaine's dachshund. Gus growled at him, which was standard procedure, and made a couple of wild snaps at his ankles as he passed through the dark living room and made his way to the patch of brightness showing down the hall. At the doorway of Elaine's bedroom, he paused and listened to the music coming from the record player at her bedside. It was something Latin with a very low spinal beat. He listened to it until she came out of the bathroom wearing something French with an equally low spinal beat. Keith was no couturier, but he could see at a glance that Elaine's dress wasn't percale and hadn't been designed for a quiet evening at home. He could also see that it was expensive. He would know how expensive at the first of the month.

She looked up and saw him in the doorway.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't hear you come in."

Keith didn't answer immediately. He just stood there looking at her—all of her, outside and inside. The outside was still attractive. He could feel the tug of her body clear across the room.

"Do you ever?" he asked.

Elaine turned around and picked up an ear clip from her dressing table. She raised her arms to fasten it to her ear.

"Going out?" he asked again.

"It's Thelma's birthday," she said.

"I thought it was Thelma's birthday last week."

That made her turn around.

"All right," she said, "what's eating you? Have you been playing with martinis again?"

"I'm old enough," Keith said. He came across the room. She not only looked good, she smelled good. "I just thought you might want to stay home for one evening."

"Why? So I can sit in the dark alone and watch Wyatt Earp? This lousy apartment—"

"This lousy apartment," Keith interrupted, "costs me \$175 every month. Considering certain other expenditures I have to meet, it's no wonder I devote a little extra time to doing what is known among the peasants as being gainfully employed. If I didn't, you couldn't look so provocative for Thelma's birthday."

Elaine picked up the other ear clip and fastened it in place. It was as

though he hadn't spoken, hadn't reprimanded her. And then her face in the mirror took on a kind of animal cunning. She turned back toward him with knowing eyes.

"How did you make out in court?" she asked.

"We got a continuance," Keith said.

"A continuance? Why? So you can suffer a little longer?"

"I want my boys—"

"You want Faye! Why can't you be honest enough to admit it? You've always wanted Faye. You only married me because you couldn't have your cake and eat it too. That's your big weakness, Keith. You want to have your cake and eat it too!"

"I want a divorce," Keith said.

He hadn't meant to say it—not yet, not this way. But once it was said there was nothing to do but let the words stand there like a wall between them, or like a wall with a door in it that was opening. And then Elaine slammed the door.

"You," she said quietly, "can go to hell."

That was the night Keith Briscoe moved out of the apartment. He'd been spending most of his nights in a furnished room anyway, a room, a bath, a hot plate for the coffee and a desk for his typewriter. And a table for the shortwave radio alongside the bed. The typewriter had bothered Elaine at night, and that was when Keith did most of his work. He could pick up extra money turning police cases into fabrications for the mystery magazines. Extra money was important with two boys growing their way toward college.

But on the night he moved into the room to stay, Keith didn't work. He just sat and stared at the calendar on the desk and tried to get things straight in his mind. He had a one week's continuance. One week until he'd walk back into Judge Lacy's courtroom and see Faye sitting there calm and proud and lonely. Elaine was a stupid woman, but even the biggest fools made sense when the time was right. It was Faye that he wanted—Faye, the boys, everything that he'd thrown away. Elaine was a bad dream. Elaine was an emotional storm he'd been lost in, and now the storm was over and he was trying to find his way home through the debris. But a week wasn't very long. Perhaps his lawyer could find a loophole and get another stay. It was actually only six days until Monday . . .

On Sunday night, at a half hour past midnight, the shortwave radio rousted him out again.

Dorothy McGannon had a cheerful face even in death. She must have smiled a lot in life. Once her moment of terror was over, the muscles of her face had relaxed into their normal position, and she might have been sleeping through a happy dream if it hadn't been for the dark stain seeping through the blanket.

She was alone in the room, except for Sergeant Gonzales and company. She had lived alone, an unmarried woman in her late twenties. The apartment was small—living room, kitchen, and bedroom. It was on the second floor, rear, one of eight apartments in the unit. The service landing stopped about eighteen inches from the window where the screen was cut three ways and now poked awkwardly out into the night. It had taken agility to balance on the railing and slit that screen; it had taken even more to swing out onto the railing and escape after the fatal shot had been fired.

"Our boy's getting daring," Gonzales reflected. "Still nervous with the trigger, but daring."

"Do you think it's the same killer who got Violet Hammerman last week?" Keith asked.

Up until this point, nobody had mentioned Violet Hammerman. She was just last week's headline, forgotten by everyone but next of kin. But the cut screen and swift death were familiar. Gonzales, the pattern-maker, was already at work.

"That was a .45 slug ballistics got out of the Hammerman woman," he answered. "When we see what killed this one, I'll give you a definite answer. Unfortunately, there's no soft earth out on that porch landing—no footprints; but the method of entry is the same. That's a peculiar way to cut a screen, you know. It takes longer that way."

"But makes for a safer exit," Keith said.

"That's true—and this caller always leaves in a hurry." Gonzales turned back toward the bed, scowling. "I wonder if he kills them just for the fun of it," he mused. "Nobody heard a scream tonight. The shot, but no scream. Still, with five out of eight television sets still going, it's a wonder they heard anything."

"Did he get what he came for?" Keith asked.

Still scowling, Gonzales turned and looked at him. Then he nodded his head in a beckoning gesture. "Follow me," he said.

They crossed the small bedroom and went into the living room. They turned to the right and entered the kitchen alcove, which had one wall common to the bedroom and faced the living room door. The far wall of the kitchen was cupboard space, and one door stood open. On the sink top, laying on its side as if it had been opened hurriedly, was a sugar can which contained no sugar—or anything else.

"What does that look like?" Gonzales asked.

"It looks like Dorothy McGannon kept her money in a sugar can," Keith said.

"Exactly. She worked as a legal secretary. She was paid Friday and gave \$10 to the manager of this place Friday night in payment for \$10 she'd borrowed earlier in the week. He saw a roll of bills in her purse at the time—\$50 or \$60, he thinks. We found the purse in a bureau drawer in the bedroom—there was \$5 and some change in it."

"The killer missed it."

"The killer didn't even look for it. That drawer stuck—it made enough noise to wake the dead—well, almost. It's obvious he didn't bother with the bureau, and that's interesting because it's what he did bother with last week. Instead, he came straight to the kitchen, opened the cupboard door, and now it's bare."

What Sergeant Gonzales was saying explained the frown that had grown on his forehead. It meant another piece of the pattern of guilt was being fitted to an unknown killer.

"He might have been a friend of the woman," Keith said, "someone who had been in the apartment and knew where she kept the money. A boy friend, possibly. She was single."

"So was the Hammerman woman," Gonzales reflected. "But no boy friend. We questioned the landlord about that, definitely no boy friend. But you're right—she was single. They were both single and both killed on Sunday night. It's beginning to add up, isn't it? Two murders, each victim a woman who lived alone, each one killed on a weekend after a Friday payday. Do you want to lay a small bet that's a .45 slug in the corpse?"

"No bet," Keith said. "What about groceries?"

"Groceries? What groceries?"

"McGannon's. Does she have any? Hammerman did, as I recall. Over \$14.00 worth."

Gonzales looked interested. He glanced behind him at the living room

door clearly visible from the kitchen.

"You're thinking again, Briscoe," he said. "A delivery boy—but, wait, Hammerman's groceries were paid for at the market. Still, it might have been a delivery boy. Tall, skinny. The lab says not over 150 pounds. It's worth looking into. I don't like the idea of a murder every weekend."

Dorothy McGannon did Keith a big favor getting herself killed when she did. It was a good enough story to keep him away from court until another continuance had been called, and that meant another week to try to reach Faye. He caught her coming down the courthouse steps. She was annoyed that he hadn't shown up—obviously, she thought it was deliberate, and Keith wasn't certain but what she was right.

"If we can go somewhere and have a drink, I'll explain," he suggested.

"I'm sorry, Keith. I've wasted enough time as it is."

"But I couldn't help not showing. I was on a big story—look."

He unfolded the late edition and handed it to her. She hesitated.

"One drink to show there's no hard feelings," Keith said.

She consented, finally. It wasn't a warm consent, but Keith took it as a major victory. He drove her to a small bar near the news building where she used to meet him in the old days, when their marriage, and the world, was young. Faye had always been a little on the sentimental side. He led the way to their old booth at the back of the room and ordered a scotch on the rocks and a Pink Lady. That was supposed to indicate that he hadn't forgotten.

"Make it a vodka martini," Faye said.

"You've changed drinks," Keith observed.

"I've changed a lot of things, Keith."

That was true. Now that they were alone, he could see it. This wasn't going to be easy. Faye took a cigarette from her purse. He fumbled in his pocket for a lighter, and then studied the situation in her eyes, lustrous over the flame.

"I've changed too," he told her. "I'm working nights now, Faye. Real industrious. I've been doing a little writing on the side—may even get at that novel I used to talk about."

"That's good," Faye said. "I'm glad to hear it." And then she paused. "How does Elaine like it?"

Keith snapped the lighter shut and played it back and forth in his hands.

"Elaine and I aren't living together any more," he said. "I moved out last week."

He watched for a reaction, but Faye was good at concealing emotions. She was like the proverbial iceberg—nine-tenths submerged. If he'd realized that four years sooner, he wouldn't have been sitting there like a troubled schoolboy waiting for the report on a test paper.

"I'm sorry, Keith," she said.

"I'm not. It's been coming for a long time. It was a mistake from the beginning—the whole mess. I don't know how I could have been so blind."

One drink together. He didn't say much more; he didn't dare push her. Faye was the kind who would walk away from him the minute he did. But at least he had said the important things, and she could think about them for another week.

Not until he was back in that small furnished room did it occur to Keith that he was playing the fool. He was trying to get Faye back when he didn't even know how to get rid of Elaine. He sat down to work. He pushed the problem back in his mind and concentrated on Sergeant Gonzales' problem. The case was beginning to fascinate him. What kind of a killer was it who would operate in this way? A half-crazy hophthead, yes; but with enough animal cunning to make some kind of plan of operation. Now he understood what Gonzales meant by that pattern talk. If it were possible to think as the killer thought . . . Obviously, he'd been in Dorothy McGannon's apartment prior to the murder. Very few people kept household money in sugar cans any more. Elaine kept money anywhere—scattered about the bedroom in half a dozen purses. The "cat-killer," as Keith had dubbed him in his latest story, would have a holiday if he slashed her window screen.

But how would he know? He thought of Elaine again—she wouldn't stay in the back of his mind. He thought of her alone in the apartment. What did she do all day? She never went to the market; she telephoned for groceries. But she didn't pay for them, except to give the delivery boy a tip. The bill, along with many, many others, came in at the first of the month. There were other deliveries; the cleaner, the liquor store . . . And what else? And then he remembered that in the early days of their marriage, before Elaine learned to go outside for her amusements, she'd been a pushover for all the gadgets peddled by the door-to-door trade. It was a thought, and an impelling one.

A gadget. It would have to be something easy to sell; getting the door slammed in his face wouldn't help the killer at all. He had to have a few minutes, at least, to size up the possibilities: learn if the woman lived alone, see where she went for the money when he made the sale. Perhaps he had a gimmick—the "I just need 100 more points" routine. There were other approaches, legitimate ones that could have been borrowed: items made by the blind, items made by the crippled or mentally retarded. Something a woman would buy whether she needed it or not.

The next day, Keith went to Gonzales with his idea. Together they paid another visit to the McGannion woman's apartment. They examined the drawers in that kitchen cupboard—all standard items from bottle opener to egg beater, but nothing that looked new. Gonzales moved to the broom closet.

"Sometimes peddlers handle cosmetic items," Keith reflected. "I'll have a look in the bathroom."

He went through the tiny bedroom and into an even tinier bath. There was no tub, just a stall shower and a pullman lavatory. He pulled open one of the lavatory drawers and then called to Gonzales. When Gonzales came into the room, Keith stood with a small guest towel in his hand. It was green this time, a sort of chartreuse green with a black French poodle embroidered at the bottom. "Familiar?" he asked.

And Gonzales remembered, because a red towel was bad for an open cut.

They made an inquiry at every apartment in the building where anyone was at home. Afterwards, they went to the apartment on Curson and interviewed all of the available tenants there. Out of it all, a picture emerged. In both cases, on the Saturday prior to the murder at least one tenant at each address remembered seeing a peddler with a basket on his arm entering the premises. One tenant at the Hammerman address, an elderly woman living with her retired husband, had actually stopped the peddler on the walk and conversed with him.

"He was selling little towels and things," she reported. "Real pretty, and cheap, too. I bought two for a quarter apiece. Would have bought more, but a pension don't go far these days." But did she remember how the peddler looked? Indeed, she did. A tall, gawky young man—hardly more than a boy. "Not much of a salesman," she added. "He didn't even seem to care about selling his things. I had to stop him or he would have gone right past my door."

He had gone right past all of the doors, apparently, except two—Violet Hammerman's and Dorothy McGannon's. A check on the mailboxes at each unit indicated an explanation. All of the other apartments in each building were occupied by two or more tenants. The cat killer concentrated on women living alone.

"That's great," Gonzales concluded. "In this particular area we have the largest concentration of unmarried people of any section of the city. Now all we have to do is locate every woman living alone and warn her not to buy a guest towel from a door-to-door peddler."

"Aren't peddlers licensed?" Keith said.

"Licensed peddlers are licensed," Gonzales said. "But what's more important, merchandise of this sort is manufactured. There's a code number on the tag inside. Keep your hat on this operation for a few days, Briscoe, and you may have an exclusive. In the meantime, this whole area will be searched for a tall, thin peddler carrying a basket."

"Or not carrying a basket," Keith suggested. "I don't think your man entered these buildings blind. I think he had his victims selected days before the Saturday check-up. I think he watched them, studied the location of the apartments—planned everything in advance. He's probably out lining up next Sunday night's target right now. He's making headlines, Gonzales. Everybody has an ego."

Gonzales made no argument.

"You've really been doing some head work on this," he said.

"Yes," Keith answered, "I have."

There was more head work to do.

Keith went shopping. He left Gonzales and found his way to one of the large department stores. He located the linen department and wandered about the aisles avoiding salesladies until he found what he was looking for: guest towels in all the assorted colors, guest towels with jaunty French poodles embroidered at the bottom.

"Something for you, sir?"

A voice at his shoulder brought his mind back to the moment.

"No, no thanks," he said. "I was just looking."

He walked away quickly. He was doing too much head work; he needed some air.

That evening he went to see Elaine. He still had his key and could let himself in. Nobody met him at the door, not even Gus.

"He's at the vet's," Elaine explained. "He caught a cold. They're keeping him under observation for a week."

She was in the bedroom—doing her nails. She sat on the bed, sprawled back against the pillows. She barely looked at him when she spoke.

"I thought you weren't coming back," she said.

"I'm not," he told her. "I only came tonight so we could talk things over."

"Talk? What is there to talk about?"

"A divorce."

The hand operating the nail polish brush hesitated a moment.

"We did talk about that—last week," Elaine said.

He waited for several seconds and there was no sign of interest in his presence. He might have been a piece of furniture she was ready to give to the salvage truck. He walked past the bed and over to the window. Elaine's carpet was thick; he couldn't have heard his footsteps with a stethoscope. He went to the window and pulled aside the soft drapes. It was a casement window and both panels were cranked out to let in the night air. The apartment was on the second floor. Directly below, the moonlight washed over the flat roof of the long carport and caught on the smooth curve of the service ladder spilling over the side. The window itself was a scant five feet above the roof.

"You should keep this window locked," he said. "It's dangerous this way."

The change of subject brought her eyes up from her nails.

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you been reading the papers?"

"Oh, that!"

"It's nothing to scoff at. Two women are very dead."

She stared at him then, because this wasn't just conversation and she was beginning to know it.

"Stop wishing so hard," she said. "You're almost drooling."

"Don't be stupid, Elaine."

"I'm not stupid—and I'm not going to let you scare me into letting you off the hook. What do you think I am, Keith? A substitute wife you can use for awhile until you decide to go back to the home-fires and slippers routine? Well, I'm not! I told you before, you can't have your cake and eat it. You walked out on me—I didn't send you away. Just try to get a divorce on that and see what it costs you!"

It was two days later that Sergeant Gonzales called Keith to his office. There had been a new development in the case, one of those unexpected breaks that could mean everything or nothing depending on how it went. A call had come in from a resident of a court in West Hollywood. A woman had reported seeing a prowler outside her bedroom windows. Bedroom windows were a critical area with Gonzales by this time, and when it developed that the woman lived alone, worked five days a week and spent weekends at home, what might have been a routine complaint became important enough for a personal interview. True to his words, he was cutting Keith in on the story if there was one, and there was.

Nettie Swanson was a robust, middle-aged woman of definite opinions on acceptable and unacceptable human conduct.

"I don't like snoopers," she reported. "If anybody's curious about how I live, let him come to the door and ask. Snoopers I can't abide. That's why I called the police when I saw this fellow hanging around out back."

"Can you describe the man, Miss Swanson?" Gonzales asked.

"I sure can. He was tall—like a beanpole. Would have been taller if he hadn't slouched so much. Young, too. Not that I really saw his face, but I thought he must be young by the way he slouched. Can you give me any reason why young folks today walk around like they been hit in the stomach? And their faces! All calf-eyed like a bunch of strays trying to find their way back to the barn!"

"Miss Swanson," Gonzales cut in, "how are your nerves?"

Some people talked big and folded easily. Nettie Swanson was as collapsible as a cast-iron accordion. She listened to Sergeant Gonzales explain the situation and a fire began to kindle in her eyes. The prowler might come back, he told her. He might appear at her door sometime Saturday carrying a basket of items to sell. Would she allow a police officer to wait in her apartment and nab him?

"That's not necessary," she said. "I got a rifle back in my closet that I used to shoot rattlesnakes with when I was a girl in Oklahoma. I can handle that prowler."

"But he's not just a prowler," Gonzales protested. "If he's the man we think he is, he's already killed two women that we know of."

She took the information soberly. She wasn't blind, and she could read. And then her eyes brightened again as the truth sank home.

"The 'cat killer'! Now, isn't that something! Well, in that case I guess

I'd better leave things to you, Sergeant. But I've got my rifle if you need another gun."

Gonzales couldn't have found a more cooperative citizen.

Saturday. Keith sat with Gonzales in a small, unmarked sedan across the street from the apartment house where Nettie Swanson lived. It was an old two-story affair flanked on one side by a new multiple unit and on the other by a shaggy hedge that separated the edge of the lot from a narrow alleyway. The hedge was at least five feet high and only the mouth of the alleyway was visible from the sedan. But the entrance to the building was visible and had been visible for over an hour. Inside the building, one of Gonzales' men had been waiting since nine o'clock. It was nearly eleven.

Keith was perspiring. He opened the door next to him to let a little more air into the sedan. Gonzales watched him with curious eyes.

"You're even more nervous than I am," he remarked, "and I'm always an old woman about these things. You're working too hard on this, Briscoe."

"I always work hard," Keith said. "I like it that way."

"And nights too?"

"Nights, too."

"That's bad business. We're not as young as we used to be. There comes a time when we have to taper off a little." Gonzales pushed his hat back on his head and stretched his legs out in front of him, giving the seat a tug backward. "At least that's what they tell me," he added, "but with five kids they don't tell me how. You've got kids, haven't you?"

Keith didn't answer. He looked for a cigarette in his pocket, but the package was empty. Down on the corner, just beyond the alleyway, he could see a drugstore. Drugstores carried cigarettes and no conversation about things he didn't care to discuss.

"I'm going for some smokes," he said. "Tell our friend not to peddle his towels until I get back."

The drugstore was on the same side of the street as the apartment house they were watching. Out of curiosity, he crossed over and walked past the front door. It was open to let in the air, but the hall was empty. He walked past the alley and on to the drugstore. He bought the cigarettes and walked back, still walking slowly because he was in no hurry to get back into that hot sedan. Gonzales was right: he was nervous. His hands trembled as he slit the tax stamp on the cigarette box. At the mouth of

the alley he paused to light a cigarette, and then promptly forgot about it and let it fall to the ground.

A few minutes earlier, the alley had been deserted. Now a battered grey coupe was parked against the hedges about twenty feet back from the street. He looked up. The sidewalk in front of him was empty, but across the street Gonzales was climbing out of the sedan. Gonzales walked hurriedly toward the front door of the building, a man with his mind on his business. He didn't see Keith at all. The picture fell into place. Keith went directly to the coupe. It was an old Chevy, license number KUJ770. He stepped around to the door and looked for the card holder on the steering post. It had slipped out of focus, but the door was unlocked. When he opened the door, he saw something that had dropped to the floor of the car and was half hidden under the seat. It was dirty from being kicked about, but it was blue and it had a black French poodle on it. He dropped the towel to the floor and went to work on the card holder. The registration tab slid into view: George Kawalik, 1376 1/4 N. 3rd Street.

Keith had the whole story in his hand. Gonzales hadn't seen the coupe; he couldn't have seen it from the far side of the hedge. He stepped back, intending to go after Gonzales, and it was then that he heard the shot. He waited. There may have been a shout from within the building. He was never sure because what happened, when it did happen, happened very fast. He had started around the edge of the hedge when suddenly the hedge burst open to erupt a head—blond, close-cropped, a face—wild, contorted with fear—and then a body, long but bent almost double as it stumbled and fell forward toward the coupe. The door was wrenched open, and the face appeared above the steering wheel before Keith could orient himself for action. He was already at the curb twenty feet away from the car. He turned back just as the coupe leaped forward and was forced to scramble in fast retreat to avoid being run down. The retreat came to a sudden stop as he collided with about a hundred and eighty pounds of mobile power which turned out to be Gonzales.

"Was that him in the coupe? Did you see him?"

The coupe was a grey blur racing toward the corner.

"Did you see the car? Did you get the number?"

Gonzales had a right to shout. A killer had slipped through his fingers. A two-time murderer was getting away.

"That fool woman and her rattlesnake gun!"

Keith recovered his breath.

"Did she fire the shot?" he asked.

"No—but she had the gun in her hand when she opened the door. Clancy, inside, didn't catch her in time. The peddler saw it and ran for the back door. It was Clancy who fired. Did you get the license number?"

Gonzales' face was a big, sweaty mask in front of Keith's eyes. A big, homely, sweating face. A cop, a friend, a man in trouble. And Keith had the whole story on a tiny slip of paper in his hand.

He didn't hesitate.

"No," he said. "I didn't get it. I didn't have time."

Who could tell when decisions were made? An opportunity came, an answer was given—but that wasn't the time. Time was a fabric; the instant called now was only a thread. But it was done. The moment Keith spoke, he knew that something his mind had been planning all this time was already done. The fabric was already woven. He had only to follow the threads.

There was a murderer named George Kawalik who killed by pattern. He found an apartment where a woman lived alone. He watched the apartment, located the bedroom window, waited until Saturday when it was most likely he would find her home and made his scouting expedition under the pretext of peddling pretty towels. Sunday night was pay-off night. He came, he stole, he killed.

There was another man named Keith Briscoe who had made a mistake. He didn't like to think about how or why he'd made it, but he had to think of a way out. He wasn't a young man any more. A little grey had begun to appear at his temples, and he was beginning to feel his limitations. It didn't seem fair that he had to pay for the rest of his life for a flirtation that had gone too far. It seemed less fair that his sons had no father, and that Faye was becoming a lonely woman who took her drinks stronger and who was running away to find the love he wanted to give her.

After leaving Gonzales, Keith had time to think about all these things. He sat alone in the furnished room and laid them out logically, mathematically in his mind. He put it into a simple formula: Keith plus Faye equaled home and happiness; Keith minus Elaine equaled Faye. The second part was no certainty, but it was at least a gamble and Keith not minus Elaine was no chance at all.

He knew the odds against murder. George Kawalik would be caught.

He was no longer a footprint on the earth or a faceless shadow tall enough to reach up and slit a window screen, lean and agile enough to hoist himself into a room. He now had a face as well as a body; he had a method of operation; more important, he had a car. Gonzales had seen the grey coupe fleetingly, but he'd seen it with eyes trained to absorb details. And Gonzales had an organization to work with. Even as he sat thinking about it, Keith knew what forces were being put into operation. The coupe would be found. It might take days or even weeks, but it would be found. In the meantime, George Kawalik would kill again. That was inevitable. The compulsion that drove him to the act, whether it was a mental quirk or an addict's desperate need for money, would drive him again.

And Sunday was the night for murder.

On Saturday evening, as soon as it was dark, Keith went on an expedition. The address in Kawalik's registration slip wasn't easy to find in the dark; it wouldn't have been easy by daylight. It was a run-down, cluttered neighborhood ripe for a mass invasion of house movers. Old frame residences with the backyards cluttered by as many haphazard units as the building code would permit. Far to the rear of the lot he found Kawalik's number. The unit was dark and the shades drawn. He wanted to try the door, but it was too risky. This was no time to activate Kawalik's nervous trigger finger. He walked quietly around to the rear of the unit. All of the shades were drawn, but one window was open. He stood close to it for a few moments, and it seemed he could hear someone breathing inside. He moved on. The back door had an old-fashioned lock that any skeleton key would open. He fingered the key ring in his pocket and then decided to wait. He left the unit and walked back to the garages, a barracks-like row of open front cubicles facing a narrow alley. The grey coupe was there.

Kawalik was holed in, the natural reaction to his narrow escape. That was good. Keith wasn't ready for him yet; he merely wanted to know where to find him at the proper time. He found his way back through the maze of units to the street, always with the uneasy knowledge that a crazed killer might be watching from behind those shaded windows. He'd almost reached the sidewalk when a voice out of the darkness brought him to a sudden halt.

"Looking for somebody, mister?"

A man's voice. Keith turned about slowly and then breathed easier. An old man stood in the lighted doorway of the front apartment. He had

the suspicious eyes and possessive stance of a landlord protecting his property.

"I guess I had the wrong address," Keith said.

"What address you looking for?"

"A place to rent. A friend of mine told me he saw an empty unit here."

"Nothing to rent here," the old man answered.

"A unit with the shades rolled down," he said.

"That place is rented. The man who rents it works nights."

Keith went home then. The old man still looked suspicious; Keith was satisfied.

There was only one thing to do before returning to Kawalik. In the morning, Keith called Elaine. It was nearly noon, but she sounded sleepy. Elaine's nights were unusually long. He'd worked out his story carefully. He was working late that night, he told her, but he had to see her. It was important. How about midnight? Elaine protested. Thelma was giving a party.

"Not another birthday?" he challenged.

She still protested. What did he want that couldn't wait? Freedom, he told her.

"And you know what I told you," she said.

"That it would cost me. Well, I may have a way of raising the fare. You don't dislike cash, do you?"

She fell for it. She would be home by midnight.

He watched the apartment from the street. At midnight all of the lights were blazing. At one o'clock the front lights went out, and he moved around to the rear. At one-thirty, the bedroom light went out. Elaine thought he'd stood her up and had gone to bed. She couldn't have made a bigger mistake.

Twenty minutes later, Keith entered Kawalik's apartment by way of the back door. The place was dark. For a few seconds, he was afraid Kawalik had more nerve than he'd been given credit for and was out calling on some other victim chosen in advance, but the fear left him when he reached the bedroom. A faint glow of moonlight penetrated the window blind outlining a long body under the sheet on the bed. Keith had his own gun in his hand. He switched on the flashlight. It was Kawalik, but he didn't stir. Keith moved closer to the bed. Kawalik's eyes were closed and his breathing heavy. One arm was thrown outside the sheet. Keith's first hunch had been correct. The arm was tattooed

with needle marks and the last jolt must have been a big one. Kawalik wouldn't awaken for hours.

It was a better break than he'd bargained for. He played the flash around the room, not wanting to risk the lights because of the eagle-eyed landlord up front. Item by item, he found what he needed: Kawalik's .45 in a bureau drawer, a pair of canvas shoes with smooth rubber soles in the closet, a pair of gloves, a basketful of colored guest towels. Keith thumbed through the basket until he found a pink one. Shocking pink. It seemed appropriate for Elaine.

In the bathroom, he located the pocket knife among other interesting items; a hypodermic needle, a spoon with a fire-blackened bowl, the remnants of an old shirt torn in strips. One of the strips was stained with blood. Kawalik must have gone deeper than he intended locating the vein. Another blood-spotted strip dangled over the edge of the lavatory. He started to play the light downward and then switched it off instead. He didn't breathe again until he was convinced it was a cat he'd heard outside the building. He left the place then, without a light, locking the back door behind him.

Half an hour later, Keith climbed through Elaine's bedroom window. He was breathless and scared. A dozen times he'd expected her to hear him sawing away at the screen and ruin everything; but the other tenants of their building had always been thoughtful about such things as late, late television movies at full volume, or all-night parties of vibrant vocal range. This night was no exception and so Elaine would be sleeping, as usual, with ear plugs and eye mask. He really didn't need Kawalik's rubber-soled shoes on the deep-piled rug, but he did need Kawalik's signature—the pink towel to deposit in the linen closet in the bathroom. In the dressing room he found two purses in plain sight. He took the money from them, jamming the smaller, an evening bag, in his pocket for subsequent deposit in the driveway below. That done, he went to the bed, leaned over Elaine and raised the eye mask. She awakened with a start, but she didn't scream. Elaine had nerve—nerve enough to stare at the shadowy figure standing over her bed until recognition came.

"Oh, it's you—"

And then she saw the gun in his hand. That was when Keith fired.

It was easy. Murder was easy. By the time he was safely in his car again, Keith was in the throes of an almost delirious elation. His nerves

had been tauter than he knew; now they were unwinding with the power of a strong spring bursting its webbing. He knew how Kawalik felt when the shot in his bloodstream took effect: wild and free and about ten thousand feet up. Elaine was dead, and there wasn't a thing anyone could ever do to him. The noisy neighbors hadn't heard the shot, the evening bag had been dropped at the foot of the service ladder on the garage, the pink towel was in the linen closet; and ballistics would match the bullet in Elaine's body to the two other bullets they were holding from two other identical crimes. And the beauty of it all was that Kawalik, when they caught him, wouldn't be able to remember but what he really had killed her. There was nothing left to do but get the gun, gloves, shoes, and the money back into Kawalik's apartment. After that, he belonged to the inevitable.

The inevitable was Sergeant Gonzales. Keith didn't see the police car in front of Kawalik's place until it was too late to drive on. He had slowed down to park, and Gonzales recognized him.

"I see you got my message," Gonzales called.

Keith shut off the motor. He had no idea how Gonzales had located Kawalik so quickly, but he could play dumb. Dumb meant silence.

"I told them at headquarters to call you just as I was leaving. It seemed a shame for you to miss out on the finish."

"The cat killer?" Keith asked, his mind racing.

"We got him. I tell you, Briscoe, I've had an angel on my shoulder on this case. Another lucky break. The landlord here got suspicious. Said a fellow had been prowling around the place last night and heard somebody again, tonight, so he called the police. The boys didn't find a prowler, but out in the garage they found something more interesting—"

Keith's mind raced ahead of Gonzales' words. He wasn't ten thousand feet up any more, but he was still free. They'd have to look for the gun. He could help them do that; in the dark he could be a big help.

"—an old 'coupe,'" Gonzales added, "like the one they've been alerted for all day. They took a look. The front seat was full of blood."

In the dark he could help them find the gun and the gloves and the rubber-soled shoes— And then Keith's mind stopped racing and listened to Gonzales' words.

"Blood?" he echoed.

Blood, as on a strip of torn cloth in the bathroom. Blood, as what was soaking into Elaine's bedclothes and beginning to stain Keith's hands.

Gonzales nodded.

"I guess Clancy's a better shot than we knew. The cat killer won't climb tonight, Briscoe, or any other night. He's in there now so doped up he doesn't even know we've found him. It's a good way to kill the pain when somebody's blown a chunk out of your leg."

It wasn't really blood on Keith's hands; it was a gun. When he couldn't stand the weight of it any longer, he handed it to Gonzales. Gonzales would figure it out. A thread, a fabric, a pattern. Elaine had been right: he had a weakness, and a man with a weakness shouldn't play with guns.



The Grateful Thief

by Patrick O'Keeffe

Strolling forward along the promenade deck, Captain Brier saw Miriam Stroude emerge from the entrance hall and cross to a window of the glassed-in section. She paused there, staring down at the dazzling blue sea, as still as a mannequin in the white pleated dress he had admired across the dining saloon at breakfast time. He started toward her, returning the greetings of passengers who glanced up from their steamer chairs at his large, confidence-inspiring figure in whites, a kindly smile on his broad, rugged face, a seagoing roll to his walk.

On the previous afternoon the chief officer had invited Miss Stroude, who sat at his table, to take coffee with him and the captain at watch-changing time on the bridge. Captain Brier intended to repeat the invitation, in his own behalf, for that afternoon. As he neared the entrance hall, a young officer, wearing the gold stripe of an assistant purser on his epaulets, hurried out to his side.

"Will you come down to the office right away, sir," he said breathlessly. "Salmon just found Miss Coston murdered in her cabin."

Captain Brier hurried into the hall and down the wide staircase, the assistant purser at his heels. Salmon, a bedroom steward, stood beside the purser's office window, flushed with excitement. The captain glanced inside, snapped, "Where's the purser?"

"I think he went up to his cabin, sir, to wash up for lunch," replied the assistant.

"Tell him to come down to Miss Coston's cabin at once; the doctor, too. Not a word of this to anyone else."

The captain then followed the steward along the port passageway on the same deck, which at that late forenoon hour was deserted. Salmon opened the door of cabin 15, led the way in, and closed the door again. It was a double-berth room with private bath and smelled of cosmetics. Captain Brier saw Miss Coston the moment he was far enough into the

cabin to come within view of the bathroom doorway. She lay on her back across the threshold, eyes staring. She was a pretty woman, thirty perhaps, clad in a pink sleeveless dress. Her short blond hair was damp with blood, and a patch of the brown carpet on which it rested had turned dark.

The captain glanced up at the steward. "How did you happen to find her?"

"I was coming along the passageway, sir, on my way back to cabin 19. I'd just remembered I'd forgotten to fill the water bottle in there. The door of this cabin was swinging to the roll of the ship, like someone had gone in without latching it. I thought Miss Coston or maybe her roommate was in, so I came in to tell them about always latching their doors on ships. I found her like that. I shut the door quickly and beat it along to the purser's office."

Captain Brier studied Salmon's face as he was replying. The steward was middle-aged and fat under his spotless white jacket, making his first voyage in the *Truxillo*.

"Was there anyone else in the passageway?"

"No, sir, except for a little girl going into one of the rooms when I was heading for the purser's office."

Captain Brier glanced around the cabin. On the glass-topped dressing table stood an assortment of jars and bottles; dresses and blouses hung from hooks, and a plaid bathrobe was draped over a chair. There were no signs of a struggle.

Stepping over the body, the captain inspected the white-tiled bathroom. The door was hooked back, partly concealing half of the tub. In the washbowl, beneath a mirror, lay a wet face cloth stained red, undoubtedly blood. The bottom of the tub was still damp from that forenoon's cleaning by the steward; in the portion behind the door, it was smudged, as if someone had stood there in shoes.

Captain Brier returned to the cabin which, with the fan stopped, was hot and humid; Salmon had loosened the collar of his jacket. The captain stood gazing in thought through one of the two open portholes, which gave directly onto the sea. They provided a quick means of disposing of a murder weapon bearing fingerprints, though not an escape route. The arc of the cloudless horizon rose and fell to the gentle sway of the ship in the sparkling blue sea, the movement that, according to Salmon, had caused the unlatched door to swing and catch his attention. Plausible

enough, mused the captain. Too plausible?

There was a sharp knock on the door and the purser hurried in, the doctor right behind him. The doctor had evidently come in haste from his cabin as two buttons on his coat were still unfastened. The purser had not stopped to put on his uniform jacket but had rushed down in shirt and white trousers. He was around thirty, but almost completely bald, and wore gold-rimmed spectacles on his thin face. He looked quickly at the body, then glanced away.

The doctor, stout and dignified, white-haired, displayed a shocked but professional calm. After making a cursory examination, he straightened up, red-faced and puffing.

"She was struck a heavy blow on the back of the head, possibly more than once, with a flat weapon of some kind—perhaps not heavy enough to have caused death. Death may have been due to shock."

Light footsteps sounded in the passageway, approaching the door. The captain motioned to Salmon but before the steward could reach for the bolt, a frowning young woman with fluffy dark hair pushed open the door. She was shapely in a yellow dress, and wore gold bangles dangling from both wrists.

"What on earth's keeping you, Fanny?" The young woman stopped on seeing the four men. The captain stepped past the others and took her by the arm. "Come in, Miss Keeling."

He led her wonderingly to a chair. As she sat down she saw her roommate and opened her mouth as if to scream. The captain grasped her gently by the shoulder. "Easy now, Miss Keeling." He motioned to Salmon to switch on the fan.

"Is she—dead?" she gasped.

"I'm deeply sorry to say that she is. She was found like that several minutes ago."

"I can't believe it! She left the bridge table to come down here for her cigarettes, a special brand of Turkish. I came down to see what was keeping her."

"Did Miss Coston suffer from heart trouble?" inquired the doctor.

Miss Keeling nodded. "Poor Fanny had a slight attack about a month ago." Miss Keeling's arm shot out, pointing at the body. "If you're trying to pass that off as a heart attack—" She jumped up and turned to the dressing table, snatched open the long top drawer.

"It's gone!" she shrieked. "The pearl necklace." She swung around.

"I laid it in here last night. It was still there this morning when I got my lipstick out. Now it's gone."

"Apparently Miss Coston surprised a thief and was attacked," observed the captain.

Miss Keeling dropped back into the chair. "Poor Fanny!" she moaned. "She didn't want me to bring it along on the cruise. She said I was careless with jewelry. I got it out of the purser's safe to wear last night at the get-together dinner. I meant to put it back after breakfast. It's worth over ten thousand dollars."

"It's still on board," said the captain. "The murderer too. No one will be allowed to leave the ship until after the police have made a thorough investigation in Kingston tomorrow."

Miss Keeling moaned again. "I shouldn't have brought it along. Poor Fanny!"

"I'll arrange for you to be moved into another cabin," said the captain. He turned to Salmon. "Take Miss Keeling up to cabin 6 for the time being. Then report to the chief steward. I'll phone him from my office about transferring Miss Keeling. Don't spread word of this. I don't want passengers crowding down here."

Miss Keeling rose and followed the steward out. The captain then turned to the doctor and the purser. "Doc, wait here. I'll send the chief officer down to arrange with you about moving the body." To the purser he said, "Mr. Frabe, come up to my office with me. I'll need some information from you for making out the radiograms reporting the murder, names, room numbers."

On arriving with the purser at his office just abaft the bridge, Captain Brier telephoned instructions to the chief officer and the chief steward, and then sank into the leather-upholstered chair beside his desk.

"A fine thing to happen on the third day of the cruise!" he said grimly. "It'll not only cast a gloom over the ship, but cause her to be delayed tomorrow in Kingston—unless we can find out who did it before then."

"I think I have a pretty good idea who it was," said the purser. "I thought it better not to say anything in front of the others down in cabin 15, but not long before Salmon found Miss Coston, I saw Miriam Stroude sneaking out of cabin 15."

"Miriam Stroude! Sneaking out!"

"That's how it looked to me. I was standing just inside the doorway of cabin 11, returning a book I'd borrowed from John Granger." The purser

grinned sheepishly. "O.K., so it was a book on the stock market. You won't think me so crazy when I make a killing. Besides, if I hadn't been interested in the stock market, I wouldn't have been there to see what I'm telling you about. Granger wasn't in his cabin, so I left the book on the table just inside the doorway. Another book lying on it caught my eye, on Speculation. I started to leaf through it when I heard someone out in the passageway. Holding the door open with my foot, I looked out casually and saw Miriam Stroude walking away from cabin 15. She had come out so quietly I wouldn't have heard her if I hadn't had the door open."

"Salmon said he found the door of cabin 15 swinging—unlatched."

"It's obvious why. She pulled it to so gently it didn't quite catch. The first good roll to that side opened it again."

"But Miriam Stroude! You're sure she came out of 15?"

"Absolutely." The purser took a handkerchief from his hip pocket and began wiping his spectacles. "It's hard to believe of her, I know; a good dancer, popular, chased by all the wolves. Have you noticed, though, she never lets herself be monopolized by one man? She circulates, keeps to herself a lot. That gives her plenty of freedom to slip off somewhere anytime she wishes. She's listed as a private secretary, but I've been wondering if she might be a high-class jewel thief. I was thinking of mentioning it to you. Now, after seeing her sneak out of cabin 15—" The purser shrugged.

"But murder!"

The purser put on his glasses. "Not intentional. Probably hit her from behind so as to get out without being recognized."

"Did she see you?"

"I don't think so. She was walking away in the other direction, toward her own cabin."

Captain Brier reached for the telephone beside his desk. "I'll send for her."

He telephoned the chief steward to send a bellboy in search of Miss Stroude with a request that she come with him to the captain's office. "Has word of the murder got around?" the captain asked.

"No, sir. Miss Keeling was too upset to say anything about it going up to cabin 6, and Salmon has kept his mouth shut. But it'll be all over the ship pretty soon, when the body is taken down below and my men start moving out Miss Keeling's things. The word gets around fast."

A few minutes later a sallow-faced boy ushered Miriam Stroude in from the sunny deck. She had an abundance of brown hair, tossed awry by the head breeze, and there was the scent of violets about her. She glanced curiously at the captain and then at the purser seated opposite him. The captain rose and led her to a chair; as he sat down again, he came straight to the point.

"Miss Stroude, would you mind telling me if you were in cabin 15 during the past twenty minutes or so?"

She hesitated, looked embarrassed. "I suppose it was cabin 15. I didn't notice. It was very stupid of me. I was in a daydream and opened the wrong door by mistake. They're so much alike. Someone apparently saw me and reported it. I'm really most sorry."

"Did you go far enough into the cabin to be able to see into the bathroom?"

"I must admit that I was well into the cabin before I realized I wasn't in my own."

"Did anyone else enter while you were in there?"

She shook her head. "No one." She paused, as if perplexed. "Is there something wrong?"

"Miss Stroude, shortly after you left cabin 15, Miss Coston was found brutally murdered in the bathroom doorway. Also, a valuable pearl necklace is missing."

Miriam Stroude looked stunned. "Then I'm being accused?"

"Not accused, merely questioned. Mr. Frabe saw you leaving Miss Coston's cabin. I wished to have his statement verified."

"Then if he saw me leaving, he must have seen Miss Coston go in immediately afterward." Miriam Stroude turned anxiously to the purser. "She came down the stairs from the lounge as I was going to my cabin. I stopped to speak to her. She hurried past me, saying she'd left her bridge game to get some cigarettes from her cabin and was in a hurry to get back."

The purser shook his head at the captain. "I didn't see Miss Coston. As I told you, I only looked out of cabin 11 for a second when I heard Miss Stroude sneak out of cabin 15."

"If you heard me sneak out, as you put it," said Miriam Stroude sharply, "you must surely have heard Miss Coston going in. I hardly think she sneaked into her own cabin."

The purser ignored her and addressed the captain. "I definitely did

not hear Miss Coston go into her cabin."

"Miss Stroudé," pursued the captain, "did anyone see you and Miss Coston in the passageway?"

"I really can't say. I didn't look back as Miss Coston hurried by me. I do know that there was no one in sight ahead of me."

"You went straight to your cabin?"

"Yes. I remained there a little while and then went up to the promenade deck."

The captain nodded. "I saw you come out of the entrance hall." He turned to the purser: "How soon after seeing Miss Stroudé did you leave Mr. Granger's cabin?"

"Not more than a minute at the most, I'd say."

"In that time Miss Stroudé could have reached her cabin and no longer been in sight. Miss Coston, too, could have reached her cabin and been out of sight. What about Salmon? Did you see him?"

"No, sir. There wasn't a soul in the passageway when I went along it to go up to my room. I was just getting ready to wash up for lunch when you sent for me. I didn't wait—came down just as I was."

"It would seem, then, that between the time you left the passageway and Salmon came into it, someone went into cabin 15, killed Miss Coston, stole the pearls and, so far as we know now, left unseen."

"The thief could have been in one of the adjoining cabins on either side," Miss Stroudé said. There was desperation in her brown eyes. "He could have dodged into cabin 15 and out again in a short time."

"There's another possibility," said the captain. "The thief may have been in Miss Coston's cabin all along."

"Miss Stroudé would have seen him," said the purser.

"Not if he were hiding behind the bathroom door."

"That's it!" cried Miriam Stroudé. "The thief heard me coming and hid behind the bathroom door. Miss Coston caught him in there."

"Then why didn't I hear her go in," queried the purser, "if I heard Miss Stroudé sneak out? It seems to me that Miss Coston went into her cabin just before I got to Mr. Granger's."

"I definitely passed her on the way to my cabin," said Miriam Stroudé. "She was not in hers when I entered it."

Captain Brier reflected that if Miriam Stroudé knew that Miss Coston had left the bridge game to get cigarettes, she was presumably telling the truth. Another point in her favor was the fact that she was still wearing

the attractive white pleated dress she had worn at breakfast. The captain glanced at his bald, bespectacled purser and wondered whether it was more than haste that had caused him to come down to cabin 15 without his jacket.

The captain suddenly rose. "I have a theory I'd like to try out. It shouldn't take long, so please remain here, Miss Stroude. You come along with me, Mr. Frabe. I'll need your help."

The captain and the purser went out by the door leading to the passageway running across the officers' quarters. The captain halted abreast the purser's cabin and opened the door. They went inside and the captain closed the door again. He glanced around. On the leather-cushioned settee was a white uniform jacket with only one epaulet in place; the other, together with brass buttons, lay beside it.

"Where's the jacket you were wearing when you saw Miss Stroude leaving cabin 15?"

The purser turned white. He gestured at the settee. "That's it. I was putting a fresh set of trimmings on it when you sent for me. I didn't stop to finish."

The captain stepped over to the clothes-locker door and opened it. Peering inside, he stooped and brought out a rolled-up white bundle. He unrolled it. It was a uniform jacket bare of epaulets and buttons; on the front were some red stains. The captain eyed the purser grimly.

"Where are the pearls, Mr. Frabe?"

His face now ghastly, the purser opened the top drawer of a brown filing cabinet, and from under a heap of forms he drew out a long, narrow manila envelope. He handed it to the captain. Captain Brier raised the flap and glanced inside, then looked up at the purser.

"Mr. Frabe, I'm confining you to your cabin until the police arrive on board tomorrow."

"Captain, please, give me a break." The purser eyed the captain pitifully through his gold-rimmed glasses. "I didn't kill her. It was her heart. You heard what Doc said."

"I also heard Miss Keeling say her necklace was missing."

"I've taken heavy losses in the market. I'm in deep with loan sharks to cover margin calls. They threatened me if I didn't pay up soon."

"You tried to frame Miriam Stroude for Miss Coston's murder."

"It wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for her," said the purser bitterly. "When I heard her coming, I thought it must be Salmon coming

back to do something he'd forgotten. I'd left Miss Coston and Miss Keeling up at the bridge game. I took a chance and hopped behind the bathroom door. If he'd come in there, I'd have pretended I was checking for a leak reported in the cabin underneath, but it was Miss Stroude. She didn't wander in by mistake. She headed straight for the dressing table. I saw her go by, through the crack between the door hinges. I couldn't see her at the dressing table, but I could hear her. I heard her open the drawer. I heard her close it again and then hurry to the door and out. She's a high-class jewel thief. No doubt about it."

"Then why didn't she take the necklace?"

"She must have thought she heard someone coming. It wouldn't have washed to say she'd gone in by mistake if the pearls were found missing. I thought she'd beaten me to them, so I looked for something else worth taking. The pearls were still there. I'd just slipped them into my pocket when I heard someone coming again. There wasn't time to put them back into the drawer. I dodged behind the bathroom door again. It was Miss Coston."

The purser swept his hand miserably over his bald head. "She came into the bathroom. I panicked. I grabbed up the long-handled bath brush and hit her before she could look around and see me. I had to hit her twice."

"It's a pity you didn't do your panicking before you went into cabin 15," said the captain grimly.

"Captain," pleaded the purser, "don't let me down. No one will know. I'll throw my jacket overboard after dark. That's what I planned to do. No one saw the stains on it. I came up from cabin 15 with it folded over my arm, as though I'd left my office without bothering to put it on. Let that fancy jewel thief get out of it on her own. No one will suspect me. Even if I am suspected, I'd leave you out of it. I wouldn't let you down."

"Mr. Frabe, I feel very sorry for you, but I cannot help you."

Captain Brier then rolled up the jacket and went out with it tucked under his arm. He paused in thought for a few moments in the passageway before returning to his office. If the purser hadn't lied in saying that Miriam Stroude went to the dressing table drawer, she must, indeed, be a jewel thief. That would be something for the police to look into tomorrow. Meanwhile, it might not be amiss to question her himself about the drawer.

Captain Brier found Miriam Stroude seated as he had left her, per-

meating his office with the scent of violets. She glanced up hopefully. The captain tossed the jacket onto the top of a filing cabinet. Opening the top drawer of his desk, he slid the manila envelope into it and closed the drawer again. Then he dropped back into the swivel chair and met her intensely curious eyes.

"The pearl necklace," he said, nodding at the top drawer.

She looked startled. "Where did you find it?"

"In the purser's cabin."

"You mean—?" she stopped, as if too incredulous to finish.

"He was the man behind the bathroom door. There was a bloodstained face cloth in the washbowl. I surmised that the thief had got some blood on his hands; perhaps some had spurted on his face too, and maybe his clothing. Salmon's jacket was spotless, as is the white dress you've worn all forenoon. The purser was in shirtsleeves. That's his jacket rolled up, bloodstained. Trying to throw suspicion on you was a big mistake; it placed him near cabin 15 around the time Miss Coston was murdered. I might not have suspected him otherwise."

Miriam Stroude took in a long breath. "Captain Brier," she said earnestly, "you certainly got me off a pretty nasty hook. I can't tell you how very grateful I am to you."

"Miss Stroude," asked the captain, watching her face, "why did you hold back the fact that you went to the dressing table drawer in cabin 15?"

"The purser told you," she replied awkwardly. "I'm sorry. I really should have mentioned it, but I didn't wish to appear even more stupid by admitting that I actually got so far as opening a drawer before discovering I was in the wrong cabin."

"It was very unwise of you to withhold it. The police would have forced that admission from you tomorrow, had they been obliged to find the murderer. It would have been most damning."

"I realize that now," Miriam Stroude admitted.

"I'm sorry I had to call you up here for questioning, Miss Stroude. Under the circumstances, I was obliged to do so. It was an unpleasant duty. I hope you'll understand."

She rose. "Please don't apologize for what my stupidity brought about." She glanced toward the top drawer of the captain's desk. "Miss Keeling is going to be so happy and relieved when you take the necklace down to her."

Captain Brier eyed his passenger for a moment before replying. "That's for the police to do tomorrow. I'll tell her, of course, that it's been recovered and is safe in my desk."

"She'll be very grateful to you, I'm sure."

Miriam Stroude then stepped out into the midday sunshine. As the odor of violets slowly faded from his office, Captain Brier remained standing, frowning at his thoughts. If Miriam Stroude is a jewel thief, she is also a good actress. Stupid? Or clever? That glance toward his desk drawer, and the remark that Miss Keeling would be happy to get the necklace back, may have been intended to learn the future disposition of the necklace. If she had really been frightened away in her first attempt to steal it, she might be considering a second attempt. And if she were so bold as to try to take it from his desk, he knew the time she was most likely to choose. It was well that he hadn't invited her to afternoon coffee.

Captain Brier had lunch served in his quarters, wishing to avoid a barrage of questions from excited passengers. The chief steward had telephoned that he was virtually under siege in his office down by the dining saloon. The captain spent most of the afternoon attending to the radiograms reporting the murder, and then reading over and signing papers and documents pertaining to the *Truxillo*'s arrival on the following day at Kingston, her first Caribbean port of call. At about a quarter to four, he stepped out on deck and casually glanced aft along the boat deck. A number of passengers were sunning themselves in steamer chairs toward the after end; nearer to the bridge, close to the sign barring passengers from that section, stood Miriam Stroude, gazing seawards. She had changed into tan slacks, a loose flamboyant blouse, and, Captain Brier noted grimly, white canvas shoes with rubber soles.

He strolled toward the wing of the bridge and turned into the wheelhouse. The moment he was inside, he picked up speed. To the chief and second officers chatting by the percolating coffee pot, he said, "I'll be back in a few minutes," and then hurried through a doorway into the officers' quarters and along the passageway to his office. He crossed into his living room and stood to one side of the curtain screening the entrance.

Presently his office dimmed briefly as someone came in from the deck, momentarily blocking the sunlight; then followed the sound of the desk drawer being opened, the rustle of paper, the drawer being closed again. Captain Brier stepped from behind the curtain. Miriam Stroude, clutching a small leather handbag, was hastening toward the door to the deck.

She halted, her face startled. "Another daydream, of course," said the captain. "The cabins are so much alike."

"You were expecting me."

The captain gave a wry smile. "Another theory of mine. The purser suspects you of being a jewel thief. He thinks something frightened you out of cabin 15 this forenoon. If true, then you were likely to try again, and you'd naturally choose the time I'd be absent for coffee."

"What do you intend to do now?"

"Call in the chief officer to be a witness to the opening of your handbag."

Captain Brier strode past her toward the telephone beside his desk.

"Before you ring, Captain Brier, I suggest you look in your desk."

Captain Brier eyed his passenger curiously, then opened the top drawer of the desk. The long manila envelope still lay intact. He lifted its flap and glanced inside. "I'm curious about the flaw in my theory," he said.

"It was based on a wrong fact. The purser's suspicion about me is correct, but the necklace he gave you was a cheap string of mine which I happened to have along with me. It resembles Miss Keeling's except for the diamond clasp. I substituted it for hers. Having a perverted sense of humor, I enjoyed the vision of Miss Keeling discovering the switch, and then trying to convince all concerned that she wasn't introducing some new scheme for defrauding insurance companies and shipping lines.

"The purser complicated matters. Had it been left for the police to return the wrong necklace, Miss Keeling would have spotted the switch immediately. Miss Keeling undoubtedly would have accused you, and others would surely have had their doubts. I couldn't let that happen to you. So I switched the strings again."

"That was a very generous act," murmured Captain Brier.

"I had to express my gratitude in this way," she went on, "because I couldn't have gone to you with the truth without incriminating myself. I was forced to do so now to spare you the embarrassment of bringing a false charge against me."

"To spare you further embarrassment, I intend leaving your ship tomorrow in Kingston and flying back to New York. I want to thank you again now, Captain Brier. I have a police record, so you can imagine how slim my chances would have been if I'd been charged with the murder. I'll also take this opportunity to say good-bye to you."

Miriam Stroud then walked out into the late afternoon sunshine, and the fragrance of violets slowly faded from the office.

A Real, Live Murderer

by Donald Honig

I was waiting on the back porch, a trifle mistrustful of the dark. It was overly quiet and the trees seemed to be watching me dourly as if they knew I was going to do something I shouldn't. Even the wind had stopped. I could hear Pa snoring through the upstairs window in slow, breaking rhythms.

It felt as though I'd been standing there for hours, but it wasn't more than fifteen minutes. I'd gotten out of bed at ten of twelve and the midnight bells had come tolling over the meadows about five minutes after I'd come down. I was almost hoping that Pete wouldn't show up. But I knew he would. He was always out late at night anyway. He was the only one allowed out so late; or maybe he wasn't allowed; but either way, he was always around, looking for some mischief.

Pete had seen the murderer last night and had told me about it this afternoon while I was watering Pa's horse at the trough in front of the Dooley House. He'd promised to take me tonight, if I could get out. It had to be very late, he said, because we had to be sure the murderer didn't see us because he was going to be hanged shortly and everybody knows it's bad luck to be looked at by somebody who is going to be hanged. We couldn't go to look at him during the day because he'd be sure to see us. So we had to be sure he was asleep. I really wanted to see him too. I'd never seen a murderer before and I wasn't going to be done out of it now no matter what.

I heard him coming then. He was coming through the elms across the road. I could hear him in there. I went down the porch steps as light as I could and went across the back yard and climbed over the picket fence. I met him in the middle of the road. A full white moon had come over the trees and you could see almost like it was morning.

"I made it," I said.

"That's good," Pete said. He had his thumbs hooked inside his sus-

penders. He was wearing the Union Army forage cap that Clay Taylor had recently brought back from Virginia for him. Pete was the only one in Capstone who owned a hat like that and he wouldn't trade it for anything. He said it was as near as he could come to fighting Rebs; the War was in its second year then.

We went down to the crossroads and then along Grant Avenue's moonlit emptiness.

"You sure he won't see us?" I asked.

"Nothing to be worried about," Pete said. We walked between the ruts that the wagons made, on the shaggy grass that grew there.

"How many times have you seen him?"

"Twice," Pete said. "The last two nights."

"What does he look like?"

"You'll see. You'll see him good tonight. The moon is just right."

The jail stood off by itself, a long, low, oblong building. Down further were the Dooley House and Gibson's tavern and the stores, but they were quiet now, very quiet.

We lightfooted around behind the jail. High up in the long, white-washed wall were the little cell-windows. Pete had moved the rain barrel under one of them and that was where the murderer was. Pete climbed up onto the barrel first and took hold of the bars and looked in, bending his face in close.

"Is he there?" I whispered, clasping my hands.

"Shhh," he said.

"Let me up," I said.

He moved aside on the barrel and I climbed on. I hooked my fingers into his belt and pulled myself up and took hold of the bars and held my breath and looked down into the cell.

He was lying on the cot, the murderer was, on his back, sleeping. The moon fell full and bright through the bars and showed him good. I recognized him now as a man I'd seen about town from time to time, Jimmy Grover. Mostly I'd seen him drunk. He was not a very large man but was sort of round. He had a short beard which lent a peculiar sadness to his reposing face. His hands were clasped over his chest and he looked just like any other man who is asleep.

"That's him," Pete whispered.

"He don't look so special," I said.

Then his eyes opened. They opened slow and mysterious and were

looking right up at our faces in the bars. And he looked worse with his eyes open—he looked like he was dead. The way they had just opened like that, it was uncanny; they had opened and found us there, or more properly caught us, and were holding us, and there was nothing we could do about it. We couldn't move. We couldn't do anything but stare back, our fingers caught around the bars.

At first his eyes showed nothing, as if our faces peeping there were a continuation of his dream. Then they became startled and I could detect a tremor go through his body. But he didn't move yet. I think if he would have moved—if he would have so much as parted his hands—we would have gone over backwards off the barrel.

He spoke first.

“What do you want?” he said. He was a little afraid and perhaps a trifle indignant:

Neither of us spoke, could answer. He asked it again, his voice not so harsh this time.

“We don’t want anything,” Pete said.

“You must want something,” the murderer said.

“Honest we don’t,” Pete said.

The murderer moved now, slowly, almost deliberately slowly so as not to alarm us. First his hands slid away and then he sat up on the cot, watching us.

“You’ve come to look at me, haven’t you?” he said. “You must think I’m a strange specimen.”

“Yes sir,” Pete said, not precisely agreeing, but trying to be agreeable.

“If you’ve come to see a murderer, then you’re wasting your time,” the murderer said, sitting there in the moonlight and looking up at us as if we were the peculiar ones.

“You mean to say you’re not a murderer?” I asked.

“I never killed anybody,” he said.

“Then why are you here?” Pete asked.

“The jails are full of innocent men.”

“But everybody says you’re a murderer,” Pete said stubbornly, as though trying to convince him.

Then he commenced to tell us his side of what had happened those few days ago when he’d got into his trouble.

“We’d been drinking some, Eddie Larsen and I,” he said. “We’d got ourselves a jug from Gibson’s and gone over towards the marsh in good

spirits. On the way we passed the Misses Tabers and Doctor Howell, and Eddie, being in his state, sorta sassed them and I had to cuff him on the head to make him stop and he yelled at me for it and we went off arguing into the woods. That's what the Misses Tabers and the doctor told at the trial and they were right as far as they told; what was wrong was the conclusions that were made of it."

"You couldn't blame people for thinkin' it," Pete said.

"Maybe not. But it ain't right to hang a man for what people happen to conclude," Jimmy said hotly. Then he subsided a bit. "I'll tell you the rest, if you want to hear."

"We want to hear," I said.

"We finished the jug, Eddie and I, and he wanted some more. He said that there was probably some in Mattick's shed and that he'd go over there and steal a jug. I was in good spirits, but still in control of myself. No, I says, you can't go onto a man's property and steal from him, especially a man such as Mattick. But Eddie, he was of a mind and when he got like that there was no standing him off. The last I saw of him he was reeling down the road to Mattick's place. The next thing I know is two days later I'm arrested for the murder, for which they have not even found a corpse . . ."

"But lots of blood marks on the rocks near the road," Pete said.

"It's a far cry from real evidence," Jimmy said.

"They say you killed him and buried him somewhere," Pete said.

"Hang it, boy, I know what they say. And I say they're liars."

"They say you was awful drunk and did it without knowing and that now you don't remember," Pete said.

"That's what they say, and that ain't evidence," Jimmy said. He rose now and stood there in all dignity, the moon halfway up him, his legs standing in shadow. "You're looking at an innocent man, boys," he said.

"Then who is the murderer?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said.

"But you're stuck for it," Pete said.

"Unless a miracle happens," Jimmy said.

"Well you hang on," said Pete, "and maybe the miracle will come true."

We got down off the barrel then and went away. We walked up along the middle of the empty road.

"I don't know," Pete said, "but he looks innocent to me."

"Innocent or not, they're going to hang him sure. Pa said it yesterday."

"I don't like it," Pete said, starting to brood on it.

"A man can look innocent and not be."

"Or might well be too. I'll tell you, Gascius, once they hang a man it don't make no difference to him if they find later he was innocent after all. They can name a park or a horserace after him, but he's finished all the same, poor chap."

"But if he's innocent then where is Eddie Larsen? It's been more than a week now."

"Could be anywhere. Maybe waiting for them to hang old Jimmy and then come out of the woods and say wasn't it a fine joke he done. Some fellows has got humors like that."

"So what can we do?" I asked.

"We give it our every thought," Pete said as he hooked his thumbs into his suspenders.

Pete would think of something, I knew. The prospect was both intriguing and intimidating because often he let ingenuity outgallop prudence. His ideas often sounded as if they had been propounded in a nightmare and then been chased for two miles over stones and then fallen down a precipice into a rapids and gone over a waterfall and been thrown back onto dry land still on hind legs and still running.

I suppose I felt sort of sorry for old Jimmy. Justice in Capstone in the 1860's was brief and positive. Public opinion—which was the prejudices of the men who sat on Dooley's porch—generally decided if a man was guilty or not, and so the trial was generally a mere formality. If enough men said, "I reckon Jimmy Grover murdered Eddie Larsen," then that was the way it was to be no matter how hard Jimmy Grover's lawyer ranted.

So they had the gallows all fixed and waiting for Jimmy and it looked sure like he was going to dance on it.

The next day, just past noon, Pete popped up out of the bushes back of my yard, the Union Army cap askew on his head, his brown hair hanging out from under. That's all he did, never said a word, and then went back down into the bushes again. But that was enough. I went across the yard and into the bushes.

"Let's go," he said. I followed him across the road and into the elms where it was cool out of the sun. When he stopped I noticed he had in

his hand three mighty peculiar things to be holding all at once: a hammer, a chisel, and a bugle.

"What's all that truck for?" I asked.

"We're going to spring old Jimmy," Pete said. I didn't bother to ask him how those things would fit in. The explanation wouldn't have made sense anyway, nor sounded feasible. So I just followed along, as I had learned to do with him, waiting for some powerful revelation.

When we came into sight of the jail, Pete stopped and pulled me behind the livery stable.

"Now listen here," he said, handing me the bugle. "I know you can play this. I want you to go in there and give the sheriff a serenade."

"Play him a serenade?" I asked.

"Sure. Play him all those fancy tunes you regaled the town with at the last picnic. Get in there and make lots of noise."

"Suppose he won't let me?"

"Tell him you've got to rehearse in a place that's got walls around, 'cause you got to play at the church dance on Saturday. The sheriff is a simple-hearted fellow with compassion for his brother man. He'll let you play for as long as he can stand it. By that time I'll have broke the bars and hauled Jimmy out of there. Now get on."

I went around to the jail and stepped up onto the boardwalk. The cider barrels under the shed, where the men usually sat, were empty; the men never liked to sit there when somebody was inside waiting to be hanged. I opened the door and saw Sheriff Rice just coming out from the passageway where the cells were. "Hello, Gascius," he said.

"Can I practice my bugle here, Sheriff?" I asked. "I'm up to play at the social on Saturday night and I need a place to practice. They ran me out of my house."

"Why don't you go into the woods?"

"You can't judge it too good out of doors. The sound waves go off and don't come back."

"Well," the sheriff said thoughtfully, a trifle dubious, "it probably constitutes undue cruelty, but we ain't got but one prisoner at the moment and he's getting a hempen collar soon anyway—so I guess it's all right."

So I stood straight up and took in a good breath and brought the bugle up to my puckered mouth and began blasting out some military calls my Uncle Herm had taught me. It got too much for the sheriff to bear and he went out and sat down on a barrel while I filled the place with fine

'brassy noise. And it was a good thing too that he went out, because each time I paused to pull in some fresh air I could hear Pete hammering and chipping in the back like a woodpecker with an iron nose. I must of stood there for a half hour, until my head cracked and I felt that my next deep breath would surely turn me inside out, and I had to stop. I cocked my ear and couldn't hear Pete anymore and so I went outside. Sheriff Rice was sitting clear across the street now, under a tree.

"You all finished, Gascius?" he called.

"Yes," I said. "And I thank you kindly, Sheriff. I sure thank you."

"That was mighty nice playing," he said, coming across the road. He took a seat on the steps and I was glad for that. I didn't want him going inside just yet.

Then I went down the road, putting my footprints in the dust as nonchalant as a prize heifer, and then cut back into the alley behind the livery stable and ran as quick as I could to the back of the jail. There waiting for me was an unusual sight indeed. Pete had knocked the bars out all right, but he was having considerable trouble trying to get Jimmy to fit through the little window. He had him out to his waist and in fact you couldn't see any window at all and Jimmy looked as if he was bolted onto that wall without legs; his arms were going like they were demonstrating swimming. And Pete was jumping there, every so often grabbing an arm and giving it a tug but unable to do much good.

Then Pete saw me and whipped off his cap and whirled it round and round to put me into haste, and I came on the fly. He ran to meet me and grabbed me by the shoulders.

"We've got to get him through!" he said, all heated up.

I stuffed the bugle down into my pants and ran after him. We stopped under Jimmy and looked up at him and he looked back at us, hung up there like a fixture, bald head covered with sweat-beads, mouth open in the little beard but unable to speak anything (though that round wordless orifice spoke louder than any words), and his body jerking and quivering which led me to suspect that his legs were doing considerable thrashing behind him.

"Now take hold," Pete said to me, reaching up and taking an arm, "and take hold good. We're going to heave him out."

"Easy now, boys," Jimmy said.

"You leave out your breath and let it be that way," Pete told him.

Then we were pulling. At first it didn't seem as if he'd ever come out

of there and then it seemed as if we were pulling him in two and I had a vision of the town hanging just his legs while the rest of him was being wheeled away by us, but then his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth too and his face grimaced and he was on the way. There was an awful scraping and scratching and ripping, but he was coming, inch by inch. The sides of the window gave off a little spurt of dust and then he popped right out, fast and unexpected—and Pete and I were both pulling suddenly a flying force and falling back and down as Jimmy fairly flew out of there and plummeted chest-down between us.

We lay there for a second, the three of us, tuckered out with exhaustion and surprise. But we'd done it. Jimmy groaned and tried to get up.

"What's the matter?" Pete asked as we got up and whipped the dust from us.

"It's my leg," Jimmy said. "I can't put weight on it."

He'd given it a good solid whack when he'd come down and now he couldn't walk. So Pete and I lifted him up erect and he put his arms around us and skipped along on one foot as we hurried him into the woods. We took him a little ways into a very secluded spot in the elm grove and sat him down in the bushes next to the brook.

"Here you are," Pete said. "At least you'll have some water if you want, till we can scare you up a horse."

"My leg feels like 'twas mule-kicked," Jimmy said, lying back, shutting his eyes. He looked a sight, what with the dust all over his vest and trousers and his trousers considerably ripped from his slide through the window.

"Anyway it's a far sight better than being hanged," Pete said, with that unimpeachable wisdom of his.

Jimmy opened his eyes and looked up at us, the sun and the leaves making speckles of shadow on his face, and his eyes filled with tears.

"I reckon I'm mighty obliged to you lads," he said.

"That's fine," Pete said. "Now you just lay quiet till we can rustle up some transportation for you. These bushes hide you pretty good, so you don't have to worry."

We left him there and hurried on back.

"Where do you reckon we can get a horse?" I asked Pete as we skipped through the woods.

"I don't know just yet," Pete said. "From a careless man probably. Let's just keep our eyes open."

When we got back, we found the place in a general furor. Men were running about and a group on horseback was gathering in front of the Dooley House. The dust was flying thick as smoke.

"See here," Pete asked a young lad in overalls, "what's going on?"

"Old Jimmy's got away," the lad said breathlessly.

We heard somebody shout out, "We should've hanged him when we had him."

I hadn't ever seen such activity in Capstone. It seemed that everybody was there; all the storekeepers in their aprons and the men from the tavern that never came out in daylight and all the farmers and their sons. Most everybody who had a horse was mounted and so there wasn't an idle horse about at all. The sheriff and his deputies went by us and the sheriff looked at me and I shuddered but he kept right on going toward a wagon full of men with rifles, never suspecting anything at all I guess, and jumped up into the wagon as fierce as a bear. Just then Eddie Larsen's father ran up onto Dooley's porch and shouted out:

"Listen here, you men!" And he held up two fingers and said, "Two hundred dollars reward to the man that brings him in, dead or alive!"

I looked at Pete and his face lighted up as if he'd received a benediction. His face was a map to his every thought and scheme.

"You can't do it, Pete," I said.

But he had his hand inside my arm and was steering me off into the alley. "I didn't say I would," he said. "But isn't that a pile of money? Think of the suit of clothes and the derby hat and the buckboard a fellow could buy with that. And it looks like they'll catch old Jimmy anyway since he don't have a horse and we can't get him one. It'd be a pity to have one of those far-spittin' farmers carry off that money, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think," I said. He was moving along real quick into the woods now and I had to skip over fallen trees to stay with him. "You can't do it," I said.

"You listen here," he said. "We don't know for sure if he's innocent or not anyway. *He* says he is, of course, but I don't suppose he'd have much trouble influencing himself of that. We're going against the whole town, ain't we? What's the chances of us being right and everybody else wrong? I ask you that."

"I'm against it," I said.

"Then the whole two hundred belongs to me."

"It's blood money."

"But he's most likely a murderer. The more I think on it the more I feel convinced."

The idea was hot in his head and there was no stopping him. I told him I'd have no part of it and so he went on ahead, slipping through to the elm grove as quiet as smoke. I sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree and clasped my hands in my lap and tried not to believe anything that had ever happened. A little bit of trumped-up disbelief can go a long way in mitigating a nervous conscience, or so I thought.

Then I heard Pete whistling through the woods and I jumped up and went hurrying, sure he'd changed his mind. But he hadn't. When I came to the brook he was standing there and Jimmy was stretched out as peaceful as last night.

"I tapped him with the chisel," Pete said. "He never saw me either, so he can't tell."

"You might've killed him," I said.

"There's a difference in knocking a man out and killing him. Now you give me a hand with him if you want to have a hundred dollars and be a hero too."

So we gathered him up by the wrists and the ankles and started toting him through the woods.

"I don't like a bit of it," I said.

"You ain't so pure yourself," he said. "Standing there and playing that fool bugle makes you liable for jail yourself."

We carried him back to the yard behind the jail and laid him down.

"We'd best bring him around the front," Pete said.

"I'll tell you one thing," I said. "They're going to hang him as soon as they let eyes on him. It won't be so pretty either, if you've never seen a man hanged, and you're going to have to stand there and watch and know that you done it."

Well, that sobered him proper. He looked down at Jimmy and began nodding his head like a man who sees he's been standing in syrup.

"I reckon they would too," he murmured.

"They're riding mean right now."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"What we intended on doing in the first place—help him get away. And the first thing is to get him away from here."

"I reckon you're right," he said, and that was more than a casual

admission for Pete Mariah to make. It was like a man crossing party lines. "You're the first one ever to talk me out of something I'd fixed on," he said.

"And a good thing too," I said.

"Let me go around to the front and see what's going on."

While Pete did that, I dragged Jimmy into the edge of the woods and hid him in the brush. He was sleeping real good. Pete had given him quite a good tap it seemed.

A few minutes later Pete came hurrying back, shoving his cap around on his head. He jumped into the bushes and crouched down.

"We've had some luck," he said. "There's an empty wagon standing with a team right in front of Dooley's. Now here's what we do: I'll get up there and drive her off and swing her around behind the stable. You carry Jimmy over there and we'll load him on and take him down to Shantytown. They just love to hide fugitives there."

So, with some effort, I dragged Jimmy into the tall grass behind the stable and hid him there. I became a little uneasy thinking about the consequences I might have to face if I happened to be caught in it. That was one thing about Pete Mariah: he never concerned himself with the idea of consequences. You have to be born inordinately fearless to be like that. But if I could tell lies like Pete could then I reckon I'd be the same as him. He could turn mighty artful when the moment called for it.

So I hid there with Jimmy, without a lie or an explanation to my name, my head just like a pocket that's been picked clean. I put my ear on Jimmy's chest to test him out and he was still there, thank the Lord, with a rasp in him like dry straw.

Then Pete came swinging into the alley with the wagon, sitting up on the seat holding the reins. He swung the rig in behind the stable and jumped down.

"Come on, let's heist him in," he said.

"Won't it be risky," I said, "riding along with him in there like that?"

"It won't either," said Pete. "We've had some more luck."

The luck was in the shape of a long pinewood box that looked to me like a coffin. In fact I thought for sure it was a coffin until Pete, using the hammer and chisel which had sure become a couple of all-purpose instruments—pried it open and we saw that it didn't hold anything but some rocks. We threw the rocks away in the bushes and then picked up Jimmy and got him into the wagon bed and then into the box. He fit in

pretty neat too. Then Pete made a couple of holes in the side for air; after that he put the lid back on.

"There," he said. "Now we can ride off and not worry about more'n we have to."

We got up on the seats and Pete lifted the reins and made the team turn around and go back down the alley. We came out onto Grant Avenue and rode past the Dooley House—and that was a long moment because we didn't know for sure where the owner of the wagon was—and down the grade. Once we cleared the crest of the grade, we put on a little speed and went rattling and bumping down the dirt road towards Shantytown where all the disreputables lived.

We'd gone a little ways when we heard ourselves being hailed from behind. Turning around we saw seven or eight men on horseback coming down on us.

"No sense trying to outrun them," Pete said. So he reined in and we sat there in uneasy quiet while the hoofbeats clattered louder and then we were surrounded by the men. Deputy Ned Casey was among them and I noticed Jack Mattick too and several other men I knew.

"This your rig?" Casey asked Mattick.

"That's it," Mattick said. "We left it in front of Dooley's while we went in for a sentimental drink. When we come out it was gone."

"We found it strayin' by itself," Pete said, just as nonchalant as a butterfly. "Just meanderin' along. Figured it belonged to somebody down near the creek."

"Well, it belongs to Mattick," Casey said. They all had a look at the box in the back and I figured this would be a fine time for Jimmy to wake up and start hollering. But he didn't. We jumped down and stood in the road. I looked at Pete, but he was offering nothing but profound innocence. He still had the hammer and chisel stuck in his belt, but nobody remarked on them.

Mattick dismounted and tied his horse behind the wagon and then climbed up into the seat and took the reins and shook them against the team.

"I reckon we'll be able to finish our business now," he said. He turned the wagon around then began moving slowly back up the grade, the men following. They were all very solemn and quiet.

We followed along after, watching the wagon bump along. "We'll have to tag along till they set that box down somewhere," said Pete.

"Suppose he wakes up in there?" I said.

"I hope he'll have sense enough to keep still. He'd better, at any rate. If he starts in a-rattlin' around in there then there's nothing anybody'll be able to do for him."

I was going to ask why Jack Mattick had bothered to seal up a box of rocks and what he might be intending to do with it, but I didn't get a chance because what we saw next happening took the breath right out of me. Mattick had drawn the wagon off of Grant and down towards the Baker Avenue Cemetery. Pete and I both had the same realization at the same minute, but we were too scared to speak it. We just watched.

Mattick got down and unhooked the tailboard and with some of the others was sliding the box off the wagon. Further up on a knoll inside the gate, among the headstones, we saw standing the preacher and some other people.

I wanted to yell out, but Pete he just grabbed my arm and said to me without taking his eyes away from the men carrying the box on up to the knoll, "You run off and steal the first shovel you see. Then get back here as fast as your legs know how. Do it all on the fly, otherwise we've seen the last of old Jimmy."

So while Pete sat down on the rocks behind the low iron fence, I dashed off for the first house in sight, away on the other side of the meadow. I whipped around into the yard and went into the shed there. I found a rake, hoe and shovel leaning against the wall and I took the shovel and went rushing away with it. A chap came down the back steps and said, "You there!" but he never had a chance; by the time he finished saying it, I wasn't there any longer. He chased me a little ways, but I knew I was carrying Jimmy Grover's life in my hand and there was nobody that could have flagged me down then.

When I got back to the cemetery, Pete was still sitting in the same place, cool as a winter's moon.

"They've planted him," he said, getting up, running his thumbs up and down inside his suspenders.

"What are we going to do?" I asked, lathered with sweat.

"The way I see it, we've got a little time."

"Poor Jimmy," I said.

"Never mind him," said Pete. "If we don't reach him in time you'll be the one to go through life with it on your conscience. So don't feel so sorry for him."

The preacher and the others watched as Mattick knocked in the headboard with a stone and then they came down from the knoll and through the gate. They got on their horses and Mattick drove the wagon away with the preacher sitting next to him. We waited a few minutes until they'd gone out of sight, then Pete jumped the fence and I went after him, shovel and all.

We spurted up to the knoll where the fresh earth had just been patted down. The headboard looked like the back of a chair and it had inked on it: DINK O'DAY DECEASED JUNE 8, 1862. Dink O'Day was Mattick's handyman, a seedy nondescript who hung on around the farm and did some chores for his bed and board.

But we had no time to speculate. Pete grabbed the shovel and started stabbing with it and the dirt began to fly. The dirt hadn't been packed down too well and Pete was able to dig it out in big scoopfuls. When his arms got tired, I took the shovel from him and then he took it back when I got tired, and then he was hip high and still going like convulsions when he struck wood. We could hear Jimmy in there then, kicking and hollering, and the first thing Pete did was take the hammer and chisel and knock in an air hole on top where it might do some good. Then he pried open the lid and Jimmy sprung up like there'd been a chain attached from the lid to his belt. His hair, what little he had left of it, was fair stood on end and his eyes looked as if they'd never seen sky before. He gulped twice before he could say a thing, his throat working and his shoulders heaving like he was trying to swallow an egg.

"Take it easy," Pete said.

"What happened?" Jimmy said. "Where am I?"

"Somebody tucked you into a coffin and you near suffocated, if not for us," Pete said.

Jimmy jumped up then and looked around at the headstones and the carven angels and I guess it was a mighty discomforting feeling for him. He started trembling as if his bones were coming loose and he took hold of Pete and said,

"G-get me out of here. P-please get me out of here."

We did that, of course, but it wasn't easy either. First we had to close up the coffin and fill in the grave again and make it look innocent. Then we had to get Jimmy out of there via the back way. Then Pete had the bright idea that with all the town looking for him, Jimmy wouldn't be very safe again in the woods (for didn't some mysterious stranger creep

up behind him before and sock him on the head and, for some unknown reason, try to secretly bury him under another man's name?) and that the only safe place would be in my hayloft.

So we smuggled him up into there and put a horse blanket over him. Then we went back to the Dooley House. Most of the men were still out on the chase and Dooley in his white apron was sitting on the porch smoking a cheroot.

"They found him yet?" Pete asked as we came up there and leaned on the bannister.

"Nope," Dooley said, savoring his cheroot.

"Think they will?"

"He couldn't of got far."

"How'd he get out?"

"Sheriff says he must've been working on them bars for some time."

"Say," Pete said, rubbing his chin as if he had just thought of it, "I noticed they buried Dink O'Day today."

"Yep. He passed on a few days ago. Had a fit, Mattick said. They was in here taking a drink to his soul when the team strayed off, but they found it. Mattick said it was just like Dink to do that," Dooley said with a chuckle.

We strayed away then and Pete was in a cloud of thought; I could tell because he'd become so profoundly still. I gave him his head and didn't say anything. Sometimes, when he thought enough, it could come useful. We wandered along the road in that manner of quiet, him profound and me respectful. Every so often some men sped past on horseback pounding up the dust. The dust hung in the air, settling back like something very old. What with the men scouring the woods and back roads for Jimmy the town was most quiet, the sun hot and yellow on the houses. Just a few old men were sitting by watching things.

"First of all," Pete said, breaking his spell, "you've got to feel as I do, which means to have a low opinion of Jack Mattick."

"I've never thought much about him," I said.

"Well he's a nasty-tempered, foul-brained, whiskey-blooded son of a turtle. None of his friends are dainty I can tell you."

"Why do you suppose he was burying a box full of rocks?"

"We're going to inquire into that."

"How?"

"You meet me tonight at the crossroads and we'll see."

"Why tonight?"

"It's always better to do these things in the dark."

"What things?"

"Looking around."

"Say, you're not going to go fooling around up at Jack Mattick's, are you?" I asked.

"You just meet me, Gascius," he said. "Ten o'clock, at the crossroads."

I wasn't so cheered by the prospect, you can be sure. But I was being devoured by curiosity about what had happened to Eddie Larsen and why Jack Mattick should want to have buried an empty box. I think that next to theague, curiosity is the most devilish affliction a body can be stung with; it's the most humanizing thing next to being born and can't be resisted so far as I know. So I spent the rest of the day in a state of collapsed resistance and later that night, after sneaking some food and water up to Jimmy in the loft, set off to meet Pete. He was there at the crossroads, as he said he'd be. The men were sitting on Dooley's porch under the bug-swarmed lamps, looking all tired and sour.

"Well," I said to Pete.

"They're in a state of mutters," he said, "'cause they haven't found him yet. Eddie Larsen's father is still shouting two hundred dollars for Jimmy."

"I thought you'd got that off your mind."

"I have. But I can't very well get it out of my head, can I? Come on, let's go."

Mattick's place was off in the back near the marsh. It wasn't much of a place, sort of run down and not very good soil, and folks wondered how he made any living from it. The truth was he was something of a dubious character who associated in Shantytown a lot and it was probably true that he made a lot of money that he shouldn't have. Nobody in Shantytown ever worked, but they always had money, so you can figure it out.

We went off of the road and through the night-webbed trees, hearing the silly crickets peep-peeping all around us and they gave me the impression of black little lights not fit for human eyes to see. We struck a path and followed it till it ran out, then pushed through the hawthorn that bunched around outside Mattick's. There was a half moon just up and it gave us enough light to see where we were going. We came out next to the house—it was little more than a cabin with a porch covered by a

slanted roof. There was a light going in one window, but otherwise the house was dark and no sound coming from it.

I was of a mind to tell Pete that this was futile and ill-advised and sure to touch off some bad luck, but it would have been like trying to explain to a dead dog. I followed him over towards the shed. It stood a good ways from the house, past the well and some cords of wood. Pete got the door opened and we went inside. There was a window and the moon gave a little light through it. There wasn't very much to the shed. It had an earthen floor and there was a shelf of cider jugs, some full, some not, and an assortment of tools laying handy about and a harness and a barrel in one corner covered up by what looked like canvas.

"Doesn't appear to be much here," I said.

"Maybe not," Pete said, but not convinced, I could tell. "Let's have a look into that barrel." He went to it and pushed away the canvas. The pale film of moonlight fell right onto the barrel and so we were able to have a good look. And we looked and we saw and I wish I had never done it, because it was something I knew I'd never forget. I was old enough to join the army for the last year of the War, going as bugler in a New York regiment, and I saw some service in Virginia and saw some dead men in a field once, but I never saw anything that looked like Dink O'Day looked that night in the barrel.

Dink was stuffed into that barrel real horrible—his feet were even up with his face as if they had been shoved in there after the rest of him; and his face was rolled over on one side.

"Pete," I said, all quavery and sick inside; "let's get out of here."

He saw the wisdom of that and we lit out of there. Too scared to pass the house again (it looked the most ominous thing in the world now) we went the other way, went clear across the breadth of the farm, and took the long way around back to town. We found the sheriff up on Dooley's porch with the men. Pete hailed him down and we walked a little ways into the shadows.

"Sheriff, we've found something of interest," said Pete. The sheriff looked at him kind of skeptical.

"Of powerful interest," I said, and he looked at me too. He was a big man. He had on a slouch hat, the brim hung low over his face.

"Such as what?" he asked.

"A dead body," said Pete.

The sheriff never said another word, but he put his hands on both our

backs and began pushing us along in the direction we'd come, doubtless taking for granted the body was that of Eddie Larsen, never even asking of us who, just pushing us on through that dark.

When we got up to the Mattick place he said, "Here?"

"In the shed," Pete said.

"In the shed?" the sheriff asked, incredulous.

"Yes sir," Pete said. "Tucked into the barrel there."

The sheriff headed for the shed. I liked the way he walked; he didn't care if he made noise or not. The one light was still on in the house, but Mattick didn't come out. The sheriff went into the shed and made for the barrel and had him a good look. Then he swore and said, "That ain't Eddie Larsen—that's Dink O'Day."

"He buried an empty box, Mattick did," I said.

That seemed to make the sheriff real sore and he headed right off for the house. While we were walking across the yard, Mattick opened the door and stood there in the lighted doorway. I guess that for a second he didn't know who it was because he said out, "Is that you, doctor?"

Then the sheriff, still walking, in powerful motion now, sure and steady and resolute, said, "What do you need a doctor for, Jack?" Then he was on the porch, in the light, facing Mattick, bigger than Mattick, and stronger, and with the badge, the authority; so when Mattick saw the shed door hanging open and he tried to break away he never had a chance, the sheriff moving—countermoving—with him and catching him by the arm and throwing him against the wall. Mattick gave the sheriff a fierce look like a caught animal.

"Dink died of a fit, eh?" the sheriff said. "Maybe from your fit, eh?" he said, taking Mattick by the shoulders and pulling him away from the wall and then throwing him back against it again.

"Lay off, Rice," Mattick muttered.

Then the sheriff collared him good and led him off while Pete and me followed behind and Pete said, "I've got it half figured in my mind."

But I couldn't figure it nohow and when it was all told then Pete confessed that it had been too complicated even for him to have totally figured.

What it was was this, as we heard Mattick tell it in the jail to the sheriff and all the others:

Mattick had caught Eddie Larsen in his shed trying to steal some cider and had lit out after him with a rifle. He shot him down and killed him.

Then he'd sent Dink over to that doctor in Little Village, the other side of the marsh, and sold the doctor the body (the doctor was known to rob graves to get cadavers to do research on). Then Dink started getting frisky about it and tried to squeeze a little money out of Mattick and that had set off Mattick's fierce temper and he had choked Dink to death and then on the day of the funeral he decided he might as well sell Dink's remains to the doctor too, and so that was why he had planted the empty box. He'd been waiting for the doctor to come that night when we were there.

After it was all said and Mattick was locked up, the men took Pete and me over to the Dooley House for a sarsparilla drink. It was then that Eddie Larsen's father (after vowing to skin that doctor) said, "It has just occurred to me, gentlemen, we all owe Jimmy Grover an apology."

"Wherever he is," somebody said.

"I know where he is," piped up Pete.

"Where?" old Larsen said.

"Well," said Pete, "I'll tell you, but it seems to me the last thing I heard you say regarding Jimmy Grover was that you was giving two hundred dollars for him."

When everybody finished laughing at the one we had on him, old Larsen said, "Well, boy, I had offered that money to see a man hanged. It'll do my heart better to see him *not* hanged; so the money is still good."

Then the fastest thing anybody in Capstone ever did see was Pete and me rush out of there to fetch Jimmy from that loft and bring him back to respectable society.



The Inspiration

by Talmage Powell

Juliano stirred on the soured straw ticking, the movement of his slender body provoking a creak from the hardness of the crude plank bed. A breeze filtered out of the warmth of the Mexican night through the cracks of the slab-and-sod lean-to. It was tainted with the smells of the nearby bullring, parched sand, horse sweat, the faintest suggestion of old and rotten blood.

Juliano stared into the darkness. The silence seemed to pulse. None of the usual small sounds came from the stable or bull pen, the pawing of a hoof, a whinny, the blowing of slobber. Even the gaunt coyotes in the desolate hills above San Carlo de las Piedras were ignoring the fullness of the moon.

Juliano squirmed to a half-sitting position, a premonition chilling him. He glanced at the lax form of Jose, his twin brother, beside him. *Burro*, his edgy mind formed the thought, *one could not look at you and guess that our sister is in trouble.*

His angry condemnation was followed by a quick barb of remorse. Jose loved Lista even as he did. It was only that, for all their alikeness, they were different. When time came to sleep, Jose slept.

Juliano got up and padded to the open doorway. Clothed in the coarse grey cotton pantaloons in which he both worked and slept, he was tall and very slender for his fourteen years. The moonlight lent a quality of brown satin to his bony, ridged chest, wiry arms, and an almost gaunt, broad-cheeked mestizo face that was shadowed under a mane of coarse, hacked-off black hair. His details added up to a look of a particular kind of hunger, the hunger one suspects in the sinewy puma that has survived every hardship.

His large, liquid black eyes searched his surroundings, the shadow of the stable against which the lean-to clung, the barren stretch of dusty earth between him and the bullring thirty yards away, the pens against

the wooden wall of the arena where the bulls for Sunday's fight were black, lurking shadows.

Nothing moved, and the night was as silent as death. The scene was suddenly not good, as it had been three years ago when he and Jose arrived barefoot in San Carlo, papa's gift of twenty centavos easing the pain of papa's explanation that it was now time for their hungry mouths to leave his table.

San Carlo had seemed the jewel of cities to their young, goggling, peon eyes. The sun-baked buildings of board and dusty stucco were two, three, even four stories high. The narrow streets spilled their traffic into a broad plaza where pigeons flew from a towering stone monument and a man of great authority in a brown cotton uniform could make the cars stop by blowing his whistle.

Now, memories of the time before that first day came like a burro's kick, in sharp pictures. The mud-brick adobe on the rocky farm far back in the hills where one coaxed the straggly corn with a tireless hoe and water carried into the fields. A dung fire burning on the hearth. The pat-pat-pat of mama's hands making tortillas. The ill-tempered old goat with one broken horn. The treasured red hen that laid eggs with two yolks. The corn-husk doll Lista had played with about the time he and Jose were born . . .

Juliano went rigid in the lean-to doorway as a weak, gasping outcry came out of the night. A similar note of torment was surely what had awakened him.

He'd taken only a few jerky steps when he saw her, a slender, twisted form on the ground beyond the corner of the barn. He ran, and fell on his knees beside her. His mind whipped away from what his eyes saw. For a second he was about to faint. "Lista! My sister! Por Dios!"

The soft oval of her face was hot and wet with pain. The cascade of lustrous black hair was tangled about her cheeks and forehead. Her large dark eyes were sunken and filled with the sight of death.

Her full red lips parted. Her beautiful teeth gleamed. "Juliano . . . I knew I would reach you. Help me, Juliano, help me!"

She was trying to rise to an elbow, her other slender arm reaching toward him. He couldn't move, held by the sight of so much blood. It stained the cotton dress that clung to her slender, once-vibrant and youthful form. It had run glistening down her calves to dye the edges of the guarachas on her feet.

"Lista . . ." he said in a disembodied voice. "Lista . . ." Then he was gathering up the loose lightness of her, staggering toward the lean-to doorway, his hoarse shouts rustling the horses in their stalls and the great dark bulls in the pen. "Jose! Quickly! Wake up, you burro, and help me! Our sister, she is dying!"

Dr. Diego Sorolla de Luz stepped onto the front porch of the long, low, mud-brick building that housed the free clinic for the poor of San Carla. He closed the screen door, squinting as he turned into the glare of the early morning sun.

He was a lean, swarthy man dressed in white ducks, smock, surgical cap. He looked for a moment at the backs of the two boys sitting on the farther end of the porch, their legs dangling. He drew a heavily reluctant breath and started toward them.

Juliano and Jose turned their heads toward the sounds of tired footsteps on gritty planking. They read the pity and sympathy in the doctor's face. Juliano paled a little. Otherwise, they reacted outwardly to their sister's death with the stoicism of their ancestors.

"I am sorry to be a doctor whose best was not good enough," he said.

"Gracias, Señor Doctor," both boys said. Juliano added, "We shall pay you when . . ."

"It is all paid, my young friend."

"How? Munó Figero hasn't been here, and no one else would bother."

The doctor wedged himself down between them, Jose on his right, Juliano on his left. "Munó Figero? The young torero? Was he the prospective father?"

Juliano nodded.

Jose leaned and spoke across the doctor's chest. "Shhh, Juliano! Lista asked us not to tell."

"Your sister mentioned her troubles?" the doctor asked.

"Lista and I were very close," Juliano said. "She always turned to me when the trouble was bad—even at the end. Not to mama, or papa, or Munó, who she loved. But to me . . ."

"Juliano," Jose said.

Juliano looked at his brother. "What does it matter now? It is right for the doctor to know." Juliano lifted his eyes to the man's. "She was not really a bad woman, Señor Doctor, even though she lived with a man not her husband."

"I'm sure of that. She was the loveliest of young women. I want you always to remember her that way."

"I shall remember her grief," Juliano said. "She was to have a baby, which Munó didn't want."

De Luz's hawkish face with its beaked nose became almost saturnine for an instant, the dark eyes angry and hooded. "I'm sure our torero will be in the clear." He didn't say the rest of it, the part that experience and medical knowledge had taught him. The girl, undoubtedly on her lover's insistence, had crept to some dark hole where some dirty-fingered old woman had used a sharpened stick or filthy hatpin to start the flow again, to abort the living thing in the womb. Then, when things had gone wrong, the old woman, thinking only of her own safety, had abandoned the girl. And the pain-wracked girl had somehow dragged herself to the one person on earth she believed in.

The doctor laid his hand on Juliano's shoulder, feeling the bony, wiry strength of it. "Don't brood, my young friend. It won't help—and she wouldn't want it."

"I try to tell him so," Jose said, "but he thinks of little else for two, three days, since Lista came and told us."

"Burro," Juliano said, "she needed to tell someone. Can't you understand?"

"Did she tell you she was planning an abortion?" the doctor asked.

"Abortion, Señor Doctor?"

"A way of doing away with the thing before it became a baby."

"She mentioned it."

"Did she say who, where, or how she planned to go about it?"

"She said Munó knew of such things. I begged her not to do it."

"I see." De Luz got up heavily. "The matter will of course be reported to the police, but I doubt that anything will come of it. The young man involved will doubtless exhibit a great shock, and one might as well try to run down an individual rat in the garbage heaps of San Carlo as to hope to nail the dirty-fingered old woman. Half the crones in town would take the assignment, for a price."

Juliano stood up on the edge of the porch. "Well, it will soon be forgotten. We are but peons."

The doctor looked at him quickly and started to say something, obviously in denial of the boy's wisdom-hard statement. Instead, he said, "There are details. Your papa will have to be notified. The funeral ar-

rangements must be made. I will see to it."

"You are most kind," Juliano said.

Noontime came and went, and Juliano continued to sit in a dark silence on the bench in the city square. Jose grew increasingly alarmed at the change in his brother.

"Juliano, I'm hungry . . ."

"Then go and eat!"

"But you, Juliano . . ."

"Shut up, Jose," Juliano said. *Papa and mama*, he thought, *I meant for nothing like this to happen when I brought together Lista and Muno. I only meant good . . .*

Was it I who ignorantly started it all? Or was it a tale written by a finger in the sky?

They had squandered the twenty centavos, he and Jose, the first day in San Carlo, on cakes of brown sugar candy sold by sidewalk vendors from fly-specked glass showcases.

Their third day in the city, Juliano and Jose had met three others like themselves. The belly cramps were now urgent, and the others were wise in the ways of urban life.

The five spotted a well-dressed man staggering from a cantina. They followed him, invisible shadows on the dark street, and when the moment was right, they sprang on him, beat him down, and ripped the wallet from his pocket. They divided the fortune, forty-three pesos, in the sanctuary of an alley.

Later, bedded for the night in a culvert, Jose patted his comfortably rumbling stomach. "This is a good thing, I think."

"No," Juliano said, "it is a bad thing."

"Well, what are we to do?"

"We'll find work."

Jose grunted his disbelief and went to sleep. Juliano lay wakeful, feeling dirtied, remembering the sudden sober, pitiful look on the big, dumb animal's face when the young wolves had dragged him down.

The day after the robbery was a Sunday, and Juliano and Jose followed the crowds to the bullring. Juliano soaked in every detail, from the tinny trumpet announcing the processional of the costumed matadors to the dragging away of the last dead bull.

"Jose," Juliano said when it was all over, "we shall be toreros. It is the

only way the likes of us can hope to be rich and famous."

"Not I," Jose said.

"You will follow where I lead." Juliano's voice left no room for compromise. "Come. We are going to see the manager of this place."

The impresario, located after asking directions of countless people, turned out to be a stooped, sallow man with incredible pouches under his eyes. "So you would go to work?"

"Sí, Señor."

"Doing what?"

"Anything for a start, Señor. Someday I will be a matador."

"You and a million others of your kind," the manager sneered. "Would you shovel manure from the stables?"

"Until our arms fell off, Señor."

"Mend the padding the horses wear? Sharpen the pikes the mounted picadores carry? Curry horses and tend the tame steers we use as Judas goats to lead the bulls into the pens when they're shipped in from the ranches?"

"Anything, Señor. Any work!"

"Well, muchacho, you challenge me. So I'll accept, because there is always work for willing hands who don't demand a fortune. But jump when you're told, mind you!"

"Forever, Señor!"

"And if I catch you stealing or loafing on the job, I'll cut off your ears and feed them to my dog."

"The dog will die of starvation," Juliano laughed.

"Where do you live, muchacho?"

"In a huge stone pipe that passes under a street."

"You'll catch your death in that. You can use the lean-to beside the stable."

"Gracias, Señor!"

After a hard day's work, Jose was always ready for his bean bowl and bed, but Juliano enjoyed the evening hours. As the sun set, he was a slender figure in the empty arena fighting imaginary bulls. His weapons were a ragged, cast-off cape, a wooden sword, a muleta made from a piece of sacking. He practiced everything he had seen and been told, and one evening when he turned in a series of veronicas the silence was broken by an "olé" and the clapping of a pair of hands. He looked up in surprise.

So it was that Juliano met Muno Figero, who would fight the next day and had come to the pens to see the bull he had drawn.

Muno was six years older, tall and slender, with devilish eyes and strong, square teeth flashing black and white in a V-shaped brown face. Already he was making a name for himself with his graceful and daring capework.

That season, whenever Muno was in San Carlo, Juliano was his dogged shadow. Muno enjoyed the adulation. He coached Juliano and took him sometimes to the cafes where toreros and their followers gathered to sip wine and talk. In these wonderful hours, Juliano soaked up the lore of the ring. He learned of Belmonte, who helped father modern bullfighting, of Procuna, refiner of the dead man's pass, of Perez, who fought the terrible bull Machin and was killed because a breeze brushed a corner of his cape and exposed him, of Saleri, who defamed the classic art with a cheap, spectacular trick, using a pole to vault over the bull's head. Saleri got his when he made the mistake of trying the trick twice on the same bull, finding the horns waiting when he descended the second time.

"Which proves," Muno remarked, "that the bull may be smarter than the man. They are quick to learn—and they never forget."

"Neither shall I," Juliano said.

The broadening of knowledge destroyed the illusion that San Carlo and its bullring were the center of everything. Indeed, there were dozens of such rings scattered all over Mexico in grubby little cities. Rings whose walls were of weathered clapboard and rusting tin signs exhorting one to *Tome Coca Cola*, whose seats were tiers of unpainted planking worn smooth. Matadors fought in such rings at two points in their careers, if they weren't killed in between. They started here, young and eagerly confident. Or here they ended, old, scarred and bitter, gloomily fighting bulls they once would have ridiculed for the uncouth, bumpkin crowds they despised.

During this period, Juliano heard nothing from his family. It was the natural order of things. Each had his or her way to go; mama and papa on the farm and Lista with her husband, an old widower who came one day and gave papa ten pesos for permission to marry Lista, who was fifteen at the time.

Their faces all became affectionate memories; and then one afternoon Lista was waiting when Juliano and Jose returned to the lean-to. They had spent the afternoon spreading fresh sand in the arena. Their sweaty,

parched, gritty discomfort vanished when they saw her standing beside the uncovered doorway, a pasteboard suitcase at her feet.

She held out her arms and ran to meet them. The three merged into a confusion of hugs, shouts, laughter. Then Juliano held her at arm's length. "What a fine woman is our elder sister, Jose!"

With rare vivacity, Jose laughed his pleasure. "But she isn't real, Juliano. She is too beautiful to be real."

The thought struck Juliano: "What of your husband, Lista?"

"He is dead," she said quietly. "He drank too much pulque in the village and fell from his horse and broke his neck."

Juliano closed the chapter in his mind without regret or sorrow. After all, the old man had had three wives.

"I had no place," Lista said, "so I came to you, Juliano."

He put an arm about her shoulders. "You did right. Tonight we go to the Cafe de los Toros and buy a bottle of wine to celebrate the reunion!"

She met Muno that night. After the old man, the dazzling, ardent young one aroused her love quickly.

Now she was dead.

Juliano raised his head slowly, aware of Jose fidgeting worriedly beside him. He looked about the plaza, at the cars in motion, the pigeons swooping from the stone monument. He felt the sun hot on his face and thought of the coldness of her in the clinic.

He uncoiled his lean body slowly, standing. Jose jumped from the bench beside him.

"Shall we eat, Juliano?"

Juliano gave him a long, baleful look. "No. We go to see Muno."

Muno was knotting a black string tie about the collar of a white silk shirt when the knock sounded on the door of the bed-sitting room of his cubbyhole kitchenette apartment.

With a final quick glance at his black-haired reflection, he turned from the bureau and crossed the room, picking his way through a small space crowded with sofa, chairs, table, the bureau, floor lamp, a wardrobe made of corrugated cardboard, and a wall bed that was still unmade.

He opened the door and stiffened slightly at the sight of the two boys in the sultry, dim hallway.

"Juliano, Jose . . ." he murmured. He stood aside and motioned them in, his face a shade lighter than normal. "Has something happened?" he

asked, sensing that something had, indeed.

"She is dead, Muno," Juliano said.

"Oh." Muno drifted to the worn blue sofa and sat down slowly. He moved as if all of his joints were dry, the sockets grating. "Where is she?"

"At the clinic. The thing went badly, Muno. She won't have a baby. She bled to death."

Muno raised a hand and fingered sweat beads from under his eyes. "I'm sorry, Juliano. Truly, I am."

Juliano looked about the room, at the clothing tossed over a chair, the socks crumpled beside the bed, the bureau where her powder, lipstick and cologne lay as she had last touched them. "Yes, Muno, I suppose you are. She was beautiful and young, and gave you all of herself."

Muno bit his lips and moved his head numbly from side to side. "Do you hate me, Juliano?"

"Hate? No. I despise you!"

"You don't understand," Muno said. "A baby would have messed up everything, right when I'm on the edge of better things. Did you know that a famous manager has come all the way from Mexico City to watch me in the arena tomorrow?"

"I see." Juliano made a slight motion of his hand to Jose and they started toward the door.

Muno jerked himself upright from the sofa. "Juliano . . ."

Juliano pushed Jose into the hall, then stopped and turned in the doorway.

Muno held out a hand. "Juliano, hatred will not bring her back."

Juliano stood and looked at him.

"Please, Juliano . . ." Muno said. "It is over, done. Nothing can change that."

"How quickly will you forget her, Muno?"

"Juliano . . ."

"Will you bring home another tomorrow night?"

Muno's face hardened. "Get out! Get out! You are a fool, like your sister. Get out, and don't come back!"

When the full moon was at zenith that night, Juliano nudged Jose awake.

Jose sat up on the straw ticking, rubbing his eyes with his knuckles and making gulping noises. "What is it, Juliano?"

"Come on, we are going across to the arena. It is as bright as day outside. I can't lay here."

Jose's hands fell limply from his face. "What? What is this?"

Juliano was already standing beside the bed, pulling his cotton blouse over his head and shoulders. "Muno Figero has drawn the bull called Santiago for tomorrow."

"Sí, but what has this . . ."

"I would try Muno's shoes," Juliano said. "I would test this bull. Now. In the arena. Will you help me chute the bull and work him back into the pen—or must I do it all by myself?"

Jose's eyes showed white with fear. "You are crazy, Juliano. You will kill yourself!"

"But I won't argue," Juliano said. "Are you coming to help me or not?"

Mumbling an incoherent prayer, Jose leaped out of bed.

Shortly, the bull Santiago took his first exploratory steps into the strange, new world of the arena when Juliano shouted to Jose to open the gate.

Limned in the moon glare in the center of the arena, Juliano watched the bull pause and paw the sand. He knew that Santiago had seen him and was taking a moment to size up the enemy, the situation. Santiago was a sleek, black Piedras Negras, almost nine hundred pounds with horns that swept dangerously outward and upward at the tips, a far better bull than was usually seen in San Carla.

Afraid that his dry mouth and constricted throat had lost the power to speak, Juliano lifted his threadbare old cape with trembling hands. He stomped the sand. "Torol!" he said. "Torol!"

Santiago circled as if unaware of the two-legged creature's existence. Then the night exploded with the thunder of his hoofs.

Juliano choked back the urge to bleat and flee. Sweat burned his eyes. His hands were shaking the cape almost uncontrollably.

Santiago grew to monstrous size as the charge closed the distance. His eyes threw back red moonbeams. Juliano kept his gaze fastened on the needle-sharp horns. They dipped, hooking, and a flick of the cape changed their course by a scant degree.

Suddenly, the bull was past, and Juliano realized he was in one piece. He turned. Santiago was already wheeling, charging again. This time, it was less frightful. Juliano's heart ceased to be a choking mass in his throat.

Another pass, with the cape swirling. Then again, and again.

Juliano dared a laugh. He stomped his bare foot. "Toro!"

The seconds became minutes, and a thin haze of dust clouded the surface of the sand. Santiago turned, hooked, and the cape swept him safely past.

"Toro! Toro!" Juliano flaunted the cape. He turned the bull in half a dozen more passes, working toward the side of the arena. Santiago was beginning to lather. *It is enough*, Juliano decided, and he leaped behind the barricade.

Jose, who had watched it all from the safety of the wooden shelter, pounded Juliano on the shoulder. "You were one of them, Juliano! A real torero."

"I have practiced the cape many months." Juliano was out of breath and soaked with sweat. "Now we work Santiago into the chute, back into the pen so that no one will ever know he was in here tonight."

Jose shook his head, still dumbfounded. "My brother—and a real live bull."

"Perhaps I had not only much practice but the strongest of inspirations," Juliano said.

"Did you not feel alone and naked?"

"As naked as Belmonte must have felt." Juliano's eyes met his brother's. "When he was a boy, the Great One would swim a river on a bull ranch at night and fight the bulls alone, secretly. It is the way Belmonte learned. He was too young to know then that he was sending many matadors to their deaths. If he had only known . . ."

Juliano turned, craned, looking over the top of the barricade. Santiago claimed the center of the arena, head lifted, horns gleaming, forehoof pawing, challenging all comers.

"When they first face a man, they think he and the cape are one. So the cape distracts them," Juliano explained. "But the second time around—should there be one—the bull in his wisdom knows the truth. This is the reason great care is taken from the day of their birth to keep them from facing a cape, until they go into the arena. Nothing is more deadly than a cape-broken bull such as Muno Figero will face when he meets Santiago in the arena tomorrow."

Jose nodded in slow comprehension of truths his brother had learned while he, Jose, slept the evenings away.

"I think Muno Figero will not live to see Mexico City," Jose decided.

And for once Juliano was quite certain that his duller brother was right.

Light Fingers

by Henry Slesar

There's one thing to be said for tyranny: it unites its victims. In the offices of the Stackpole Glove Company, intramural dissension was rare; the employees were firmly organized in their dislike of Ralph Stackpole, president and chief executive officer. Stackpole knew it, and Stackpole didn't care. Stackpole had learned something in 50 years of living and 30 years of the glove business, that the golden rule was: do unto others *before* they do unto you.

The morning that Stackpole discovered a thief in his organization began pleasantly enough. He had walked the six blocks from his apartment to the office, and the January frost had put an almost friendly glow on his seamed cheeks. He had been cordial to his wife at breakfast and polite to the secretary who brought him his mail. Even Blackburn, the office manager, whose nervous manner never failed to irritate him, got the benefit of a small smile when he entered the president's sanctum. The smile wasn't going to last.

"I can't understand it, Mr. Stackpole," Blackburn said. "Those model number 205's we ordered, the factory sent out a dozen samples, and all we have is eleven . . ."

"Well, what can I do about it?"

"But it isn't just the 205's, Mr. Stackpole. Lately we've been having shortages that don't make any sense. It's almost like—" he paused the length of a nervous tic "—like somebody's been pilfering."

Stackpole gasped for air. "You mean I'm being robbed? Right in my own office?"

"Well, the way those gloves lie around the place, anybody could slip a box into a coat pocket or briefcase—"

The president stood up, his anger Jovian. "Nobody takes anything from me, Blackburn, understand? Nobody! I want you to find that crook and do it today!"

"Me?" Blackburn trembled. "But how? I wouldn't know where to begin!"

"Do you know how many pairs are missing?"

"Well, I'd estimate it at around six or seven."

"Yes, and for all we know it's a dozen. Or two dozen. And who knows what else he's been taking around here? Stationery. Paper clips. My cigars!" He flipped open the lid of his humidor. "Anybody could walk in here and filch my cigars!"

"Of course, I could write a memo—"

Stackpole snarled with disgust. "Get out," he said. "Don't send any memos. I'll handle this myself."

Stackpole's method of dealing with the situation was direct. He called in a private detective named Semple and threw the problem at him. Semple, a chunky little man accustomed to the troubles of harried executives, listened attentively and asked, "Just how serious is it, Mr. Stackpole? Doesn't sound like you lost more than ten or fifteen dollars' worth of goods. Is that about the figure?"

"It's the principle," Stackpole said righteously. "Nobody takes anything from me, Semple. Especially those people whose salaries I pay."

"Do you have any idea who it might be?"

"It could be anybody," Stackpole growled. "They all look shifty-eyed to me. Maybe it's my own secretary. Or a mail clerk. Or maybe that good-for-nothing Fred Cotter."

"Who?"

"Cotter. My designer. Young man. Bachelor, with lots of girl friends. Maybe they're all wearing my gloves. I never did like Cotter."

"Then why do you keep him on?"

"Knows his stuff," Stackpole said ruefully. "He's the best in the business when he works at it, but half the time he's out of the office. Says he's going to 'studios,' but I know better. I wouldn't be surprised if he's the thief."

"Well, I wouldn't judge too quickly," Semple said sensibly. "Best thing to do in this situation is set a trap."

"A trap? What kind of trap?"

"I've used this method in some of the biggest firms in the country, and it's highly successful. You might say that it catches the culprit red-handed." He chuckled, and looked longingly at Stackpole's cigar.

"What do we have to do?"

"It's really very simple. Whenever you like, I'll bring in a supply of a fine, luminous powder with special clinging properties. We'll coat several glove boxes with the powder and place them strategically around the office, within reach of temptation. As soon as we've determined that some have been stolen, we conduct our inquiry with full confidence."

"Inquiry?"

"Yes. You see, the luminous powder will come off on the thief's hands, but he won't be able to see it except in the dark. Nor will it wash off his hands by any ordinary cleansing method. He'll be branded with his guilt as if he were tattooed."

"I get it," Stackpole snickered. "Then all I've got to do is take everybody into a darkened room and look for a pair of shiny hands." He leaned back in his swivel chair, his own eyes luminous. "It's a great idea, Semple. When can we start?"

"I could set it up this very evening if you like."

"One minute." Stackpole snatched the phone from its cradle and called his office manager. "Blackburn? We expecting anybody to be out of the office tomorrow?"

"No, sir."

"You sure now? Fred Cotter and everybody?"

"Yes, sir, everyone will be here far as I know."

"Fine," Stackpole said, hanging up. Then he grinned at the detective. "Have a cigar," he said.

That night, when the office was evacuated, Stackpole and his private investigator saw to the seeding of their plant. The president chortled gleefully as Semple coated the glove boxes with the white powder, and marveled at its near-invisibility. He insisted on extending the trap to his own cigar humidor, but that was as far as Semple would permit. At home, Stackpole described the arrangement to his wife; she had never seen him so exuberant before.

There was no business conducted out of Stackpole's private office the next day. He remained behind closed doors except for the lunch hour. Periodically, he checked with Blackburn to make sure that all personnel were about. Except for a secretary who was sent on an outside errand, a stock clerk who came down with an infected tooth, and a "studio" visit by Fred Cotter that lasted two hours, all were present and accounted for.

Until four that afternoon, Stackpole was filled with growing anxiety that the plot would fail, that the thief would elect to be honest that day. He was too impatient for a long siege: he wanted his victim now. And at four-fifteen, it appeared that he had him.

Blackburn telephoned.

"Mr. Stackpole?" His voice was hushed. "I just made a recount of the sample stack near the accounting department. There's a box missing."

"Are you sure?" Stackpole said, yanking the cigar out of his mouth. "You counted 'em carefully?"

"Several times. There were twenty-four boxes originally; now there are twenty-three."

Stackpole thumped his desk. "Everybody in the office?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Cotter returned about half an hour ago, so everyone's here."

"Get 'em all into the large conference room at four-fifty, prompt. No excuses. I want hundred per cent attendance!"

"Yes, sir!"

Stackpole was uncontrollable; no ingeniously profitable business scheme had ever excited him as much. By now, he had forgotten Semple's role in the affair and thought of the scheme as his own.

When his employees marched into the windowless conference room at ten minutes of five, their faces were sullen. A mass meeting usually denoted a bawling-out, a limp holiday greeting at the end of the year, or a mournful report on profits. There were some titters from the girls in the secretarial pool, and a crooked grin on the face of Fred Cotter as he ambled into the room in shirtsleeves.

Stackpole went to the head of the conference table.

"Please let me have your attention," he said dryly, silencing the last shuffle and cough. "I've called you all together for the purpose of a little experiment. I want each of you to remain just where you are, and put out your hands so." He demonstrated, palms upward, fingers extended.

There was a buzz of curiosity, and some hesitation.

"Well, what are you waiting for?"

Every hand went out.

"Lights, Mr. Blackburn," Stackpole said.

Blackburn walked to the light switch, and flicked it. The room was darkened, and the surprised silence was broken by a ripple of nervous giggles.

"Mr. Stackpole!"

It was Blackburn's voice. Stackpole looked in its direction, and the sense of triumph that swelled in his chest almost popped his shirt buttons. For there, at the far end of the room, was a pair of brightly glowing hands.

"Lights! Lights!" Stackpole cried, pushing through the crowd and clamping his fingers on the offender's arm.

Fred Cotter blinked at him. "What's the matter? What did I do?"

"So it *was* you!" Stackpole said ecstatically. "I knew I was right, I knew it! You thought you could get away with it—you thought you could cheat me—"

"What are you talking about?"

"Mr. Cotter, would you show me the contents of your briefcase?"

"Huh?"

"No, I don't suppose you'd be that stupid. You've probably gotten rid of the gloves already, haven't you? On one of your 'studio' visits." He whirled toward the office manager. "Blackburn, I want you to make up Mr. Cotter's check tonight. His discharge is effective immediately."

"You're firing me?" Cotter looked pleadingly at his fellow employees, but they were afraid to look back with sympathy. "I don't get it."

"You stole from me! You stole from the company! Do you deny it?"

Cotter flushed. "O.K., so I took a pair of gloves now and then. I didn't see any harm in it—"

"No, I don't suppose you did. Well, nobody takes anything from me. Mr. Cotter, it's too bad you didn't know that. You can clean up your desk tonight; I don't want to see you here in the morning."

Stackpole turned and glowered at the rest. Then his face softened.

"Goodnight, everyone," he said.

Stackpole spent the rest of the evening in his office, catching up on the work he had let slide during the day. It was too late for dinner at home, so he went to his club and enjoyed a solitary meal there. By the time he returned to his apartment, it was after eleven, and his wife was already preparing for bed.

"My, you worked late tonight," she said, slipping into her nightgown. "How did your experiment go?"

"Perfectly," Stackpole chuckled. "And you know who the thief turned out to be? That no-good Fred Cotter!"

"Cotter? You mean your designer?"

"That's right; you met him at the Christmas party last month. The one who's always grinning. But I wiped the smile off his face tonight. I showed him that nobody takes anything from me!"

With a satisfied grunt, he crawled beneath the covers, and snapped out the bedside light. As he rolled over on his side he saw the luminous handprint on his wife's bare back.



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Doctor Apollo

by Bryce Walton

Dr. Kessler, a senior psychiatrist and head of the city's Mental Hygiene Clinic, read the morning paper and hurried to Central Homicide. Murder was his specialty. This could be a special kind of murder.

"The kid confessed," Lt. Reed said. "What else is there to know?"

"For you, nothing," Kessler said. "You have your murderer." His nose wrinkled. He disliked the crude odors of police stations. "How's he taking it?"

"Still happy. He didn't try to run or hide. Walked up to patrolman name of Casetta right after he did it, little after midnight, and held up his bloody little hand and the icepick. 'I'm Richard Gorman, sir,' he said. 'I just killed a man.' End of quote."

"He here now?"

"Nope, Juvenile Detention. We're finished with the punk."

"How did his mother take it?"

"How'd you expect she would?" Reed shook his head. "A real floozie. The kid caught her playing house with this guy Laramer. He doesn't want to see his Ma. He wouldn't talk with a public defender either."

Reed grinned. "Sorry, Doc, no previous record of juvenile delinquency, no anti-social tendencies. Normal, well-behaved kid who worked long hours after school in a factory just to help support his poor widowed mother and her assortment of suitors. His employer just can't get over what a nice gentle young man Gorman was. Neighbors think him the sweetest boy ever. You'll have it tough getting a loony diploma for Gorman."

"Just the same," Kessler said evenly, "he stabbed Laramer with an icepick. What was it—thirty-two times?"

"Give or take a few. But the D.A. is going to hang this one."

"You've done your job," Kessler said. His heavily-lensed glasses gave his angularly thin face a bird-like austerity. "Mine can only begin now,

because I'm interested in *why* he did it."

"Look at his record! Crazy? Hell, Doc, he just lost his temper! Blew his cork. Can happen to anyone."

"Fortunately for you, Lieutenant, it doesn't always happen everytime someone loses their temper."

"I can tell you why he did it. Very simple, Doc."

"Tell me in your simple, easy-to-understand language."

"He hated Laramer's guts. And with good reason. It doesn't make him crazy. Just a revenge killing. And he'll hang for it."

Walking past the park toward Juvenile Detention, Kessler watched a blurring stream of humanity swimming past like fish in a murky aquarium. Hate festered in all of them, but few of them committed murder. Such cases as Gorman's could help illuminate one of the darkest cellars of psychiatry: the psychology of action. Everyone hated, but few carried the emotion out of fantasy into reality and to its logical climax of murder. Why Gorman?

Also, Kessler was particularly interested in murder that resulted from family hatred. Hatred for the father by the son, for example, the classical Oedipus complex. Laramer had not been Gorman's real father, but he had certainly served as a substitute for his father.

On the surface, Gorman's case seemed amazingly similar to the classical patricide cases. Still, Kessler could not be certain until he had a talk with the boy, gave him a few psychological tests, interviewed some of his acquaintances, particularly his mother.

Possibly, for the good of science, Gorman deserved to be preserved from the hangman.

Gorman lay on his bunk in an isolated corner of the detention ward. Grey light through a barred window formed charcoal stripes across his face. A burly female matron resembling a pseudo-woman wrestler stood by the door. Kessler detested stupid miserly taxpayers who assured such attendants because of low pay.

He stood there, unobserved by Gorman, studying him with a deep clinical interest. A slim, rather handsome boy with short blond hair, straight even features. As he walked forward, Gorman sat up and smiled shyly. He was the kind of boy you like the moment you see him.

When Kessler introduced himself, said he was there to help Gorman,

that he was no cop, no preacher, no lawyer, and that no one had sent him, Gorman merely smiled timidly and nodded.

It was difficult at first to win the confidence of criminals. But then, Gorman was not, technically, a criminal.

Kessler lit his pipe.

"I think I know-how you feel now, Richard. A great relief. You feel free and good about everything now."

Gorman relaxed, appeared to be grateful for this unexpected and sympathetic understanding. A few selective questions elicited answers indicating that Gorman had lived a rather lonely life, misunderstood by everyone, and was, consequently, a stranger to himself.

Kessler explained that he was a doctor and that he only wanted to help Gorman understand something of what had happened. He wanted to be Gorman's friend. He was no judge; he did not blame Gorman for his deed because, though it was socially wrong, Kessler understood thoroughly that the deed had been completely logical to Gorman. "And now you feel good about it," Kessler said. "As if you had been sick at your stomach for a long time and finally managed to throw up."

"Yes," Gorman breathed. His eyes were brighter now. "Yes," he said again, eagerly, reaching out to Kessler like a lonely child who has finally found someone who will listen, who is interested, who won't laugh or ridicule, misunderstand or hit back with a club. "It's like that. Like a big weight was off me."

"I'll be back to see you as often as I can," Kessler said. "I hope you will talk freely, tell me everything you can about yourself, how you've lived, how you feel about things. About Laramer, your mother, your father."

"Why?"

"We want to know why you did it, Richard. For your sake and for the sake of society. You might say it's like looking for a kind of hidden cancer. If we find it, isolate it, we can cut it out."

"It won't bring Laramer back."

"But you're not dead, Richard. There's still a chance for you to return to society, live a normal healthy life. I'm sure you want to whether you can admit it to yourself now or not. But to do that, we must clear this thing up, Richard, understand it."

Gorman clenched his hands. "What's there to understand? I mean, I know why I did it. I hated his guts."

It was, Kessler thought, a most convenient term. One word. Hate. Launch wars with it. Blow up the world with it.

"Hate is common enough," Kessler said gently. "But why did you have to kill Laramer?"

"I hated him that much." Gorman put a cigarette between his lips. Kessler offered his lighter. "Thanks, sir," Gorman said and looked up at the barred prison window.

It was obvious that the boy was repressed, unaccustomed to talking. He began awkwardly, groping for words, but then the intensity of emotion seemed to assume command and he poured out his hostility and justifications, and was astonished by his own verbosity.

Everything had been good until his father was killed in an industrial accident five years ago. His father, he said, had been good to him, bought him things, boxed with him, taken him to the gym. His father and his mother quarreled a lot, but that was all right, because she was a nagger.

The small note recorder in Kessler's pocket faithfully preserved Gorman's testimony.

" . . . then when Dad died, she started having guys in all the time. I was like a stranger around there and she didn't care about me any more except that I worked in the goddamned bakery and brought home my pay every week . . . and she didn't bother cooking for me any more or helping me . . . but these guys, especially Laramer, she couldn't do enough for him . . . washing his underwear, cooking his meals . . . he didn't marry her, see, but he practically lived there, moved in, took over . . . and he was a lush, a drunken bum and he started beating hell out of me all the time, but she didn't care, didn't say anything . . . she just took my pay and bought things for Laramer, clothes and wine, cigarettes and beer . . . he started kicking me out of my own house and beating hell out of me . . . bigger than me and a tough kind of guy . . . and when he was there all night he wouldn't let me in the house, and I'd walk around, sleep in the park . . . and he hit her too . . . I'd come back in the morning and she'd have a black eye, two black eyes, but she'd be fixing him breakfast just the same, never fixing me any . . . "

"But you never told anyone about it, did you?" Kessler said. "You could have told someone. That would have helped."

"How? Who would have done anything? And anyway, I guess it was sort of an honor thing. Didn't want people to know what kind of woman she was. Like honor in the family . . . "

Highly moral cover-up for a deep unconscious conflict, Kessler thought. Love for the mother, hatred for the rival.

"... and then I came in last night making plenty of noise so they'd know I was there . . . and they was in the bedroom and I heard them laughing at me . . . so I got the icepick and went in there . . . after that, like you say, I felt so good. I don't care what happens to me now. No matter what happens, it's better than what I had before. Who can live in that kind of setup? I had to do it. They can hang me or anything they want, I don't care. It was worth it."

Gorman sat up suddenly and raised his fists toward the window. "I'm not sorry. He had it coming. I ought to have done it the first time I saw him! I ought to have killed him right then. I hated him, that's all. I hated his guts!"

A mask of interest covered Kessler's face as he sat and listened. But his thoughts were busy inside working out a neat clinical pattern. It certainly appeared to be another classical Oedipal complex situation, with interesting variations worthy of further study. There were the usual typical elements. The normal boy exploding into savage murder. His youthfulness. The murder occurring in his mother's bedroom. After the murdér, no desire to avoid punishment. No guilt, no regret. The usual justification of family honor. It all added up. Kessler made his decision without bothering to interview Mrs. Gorman.

Richard Gorman certainly was worth saving from the hangman's noose.

Gorman was a fine specimen. For a moment Kessler saw him as a kind of golden-furred guinea pig, then guiltily dismissed the image as being too cruel. No, Gorman was a bit like cancerous tissue that should be isolated, preserved for study, in order to prevent the disease from spreading.

No, not quite that either. Gorman was like those canaries miners carry in cages to give warnings of the first approach of dangerous gases.

"That's all there is to it, sir. I hated his guts."

Weeks passed. It wasn't easy to get Gorman to think of himself in a less primitive manner, and in a more sophisticated and complicated way. It wasn't easy to get Gorman to delve deeper into the complex regions below the level of conscious awareness.

But Kessler managed it. Gorman's insights developed slowly bit by bit. Kessler talked to him, listened to him, gave him routine psychological

tests. The Rohrshach, word association, picture-frustration tests, an Intelligence test. Gorman was illiterate, ignorant, but far from stupid. Because of his being cut off from his true self, his school work had been a failure. He had never read anything but a few comic books.

All of that changed slowly at first, then with astonishing rapidity. Gorman became not only an omnivorous reader, but he proved to possess an amazing retentive memory.

He became fascinated with the literature recommended by Kessler, whom he began to regard as a kind of God. And Kessler did not select Gorman's reading indiscriminately. For he believed in giving a patient literature that seemed to have a special application to his problem.

Gorman's basic conflict situation derived from the Oedipus complex. Kessler was certain of this, so he recommended *Hamlet*, and Sophocles, *King Oedipus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the story of *Orestes*. And he found it very interesting that Gorman identified himself with Hamlet, rather than with Oedipus, and seemed especially intrigued by the Closet Scene.

Gorman developed a sense of his own importance, worthiness, and responsibility for self. Vital insights occurred with increasing rapidity.

"Sure," Gorman said. "Plenty of guys' fathers die, and their mothers start making out with other guys, and plenty of guys hate their mothers' lovers. But now I see how you can hate your mother's lover, even hate your own father because of their relationship with your mother."

But he had some difficulty understanding why Laramer was the same as his father, when Laramer was a drunken brutal bum, and his father had been a nice guy.

Kessler explained. "Your father was dead, so you could idealize him. He probably wasn't quite as perfect as you made him out to be. You could switch all of your suppressed hostility toward your real father onto Laramer. It was easier to hate Laramer openly, because he wasn't your real father, but at the same time had assumed your father's role. Not only could you hate him openly, but you could let this desire to kill him build up in you. And finally you could actually kill him, without guilt."

Gorman nodded. His eyes were bright now with pride and awe of himself. "Just like Hamlet," he said. "Just like Hamlet in the book."

"That's right. Just like Hamlet, Prince of Denmark."

Gorman stretched out on the bunk in the jail. "It sure makes more sense to me now. Here I thought I did it just because I hated his guts."

"Do you have some feeling now for why you did it, Richard?"

"Oh, sure. Wasn't because I hated him. Hate is only a symptom of a deeper conflict. I hated him because he stood for my father. And I always unconsciously hated my father, because I was always jealous of his position with mother. So this hate built up inside me for years, but I kept it down and hidden and I didn't know it. I couldn't do anything about it for a long time, not while Dad was alive, because I felt too guilty about wanting to murder my own father when all the time he seemed like such a nice guy. Then when Laramer came along, I could do it. It was sort of like Hamlet there too. And there was this phony family honor business. I understand all that now."

Kessler took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. "Yes," he whispered, barely able to control his own emotion. "The classical Oedipus complex. Just remember the dynamics of the complex. You acted from a primary repressed hostility against the father image as the envied rival for your mother's affection."

Kessler stopped himself. He had a tendency to slide off into a lot of technical jargon at times. He did not believe in that sort of thing, especially with illiterates. That stuff was for textbooks, stuffed shirts, intellectuals at cocktail parties, that stuff was canned language. Sometimes it was necessary for communication.

It was *very* necessary if you were to impress the Lunacy Commission.

Meanwhile, Gorman had, of course, been charged with murder, transferred from Juvenile Detention to jail, back to JD, back to jail, into homicide court.

Kessler prepared a voluminous brief that explained Gorman's deed in highly complex language and then he appeared before the Lunacy Commission.

Gorman had protested against the idea of being labeled crazy.

"But without a favorable recommendation to the court by the Lunacy Commission," Kessler explained, "they can hang you. You're charged with murder."

"But I wasn't crazy," Gorman said.

"Just the same I've got to convince the Lunacy Commission that when you killed Laramer you didn't know the difference between right and wrong." He tried to explain the technicalities of what constituted legal insanity.

"But we know I wasn't crazy," Gorman shouted, and almost broke into tears. "We've worked it all out. I was just the victim of a compulsion neurosis."

"I have to plead insanity to save your life, and that's what I'm going to do," Kessler insisted. "You're just beginning to awaken, just beginning to find out what life can mean. You've got to be saved."

So Kessler appeared to testify before the Lunacy Commission considering Gorman's case, and save him. After six hours of overwhelming clinical evidence, truly a virtuoso performance, he proved that Gorman was legally insane at the time of the murder, according to the definition of insanity the law provides. He proved the existence of irresistible impulse. He proved that Gorman suffered from an almost specific disorder in the discrimination between right and wrong, and that he had regarded as moral, and even heroic, a deed that was most abhorrent to the conscience of normal man.

The Commission accepted Kessler's opinion. Gorman was committed to a state asylum for the criminally insane.

Kessler deplored conditions in state asylums. Publicity to the contrary, he knew most of them for what they really were behind false fronts. Modernized bedlam, sadistic keepers, pitifully inadequate staff supervision.

He arranged for Gorman's subsequent transfer to a private sanitarium known as Green Valley Manor on which Kessler served as a part-time resident staff member and which he had helped found and develop. Here conditions were ideal for the advanced treatment of those who could be saved.

Green Valley Manor resembled a lovely lakeside resort. Parklike grounds contained numerous small cottages, each reserved for guests, some of whom were wealthy enough to pay fifteen hundred dollars a month, and a few others who paid what they could afford, which was sometimes nothing at all. These special cases, such as Gorman's, were admitted on the recommendation of one of Green Valley Manor's clinical staff.

Fountains played in the shadows of Grecian columns, and Greek and Roman statues sometimes seemed to dance in the shaded glades.

On the day that Gorman was admitted to Green Valley Manor, Kessler personally showed him about the grounds. They walked past the violent

ward, and a building given over to shock therapy. The building somewhat resembled an old world pavilion with fluted columns and a statue of Neptune replete with seaweeded triton. There was also a place called Seclusion Cottage, but Kessler assured Gorman that he would never become acquainted with it.

Kessler opened the door of Gorman's private cottage and they went in. Gorman sat down and lit a cigarette and looked about him with shy gratitude, and seemed incapable of adequate comment.

"Well, Richard, this will be your home for some time. I am sure you will find it much more comfortable and reasonable than conditions on the outside."

Gorman nodded.

"You can study and grow here with comparative freedom. You may see me whenever you like. You'll find understanding and sympathy here. Few of those here are in any position to level the accusative finger. Your new life begins here, Richard. One day you'll go back out there, a healthy normal young man. You'll marry, have kids."

"Thanks to you, sir."

Kessler smiled with slight embarrassment at the open worship in Gorman's voice and shining from his eyes. Hastily, he said, "From now on you'll be more and more on your own. You must start to become independent of me. You must realize that no doctor is as important as you think. I am not God—not even his cousin."

Gorman smiled timidly, but did not seem convinced. This would be, it always was, the toughest part. The breaking away from the analyst, finally launching oneself into the mainstream as a truly independent person.

The windows were open. The scent of lilac and wisteria drifted on the warm spring air. A hummingbird hung suspended in the window, framed like an iridescent and timeless picture. Pleasant laughter drifted through the shading evening.

Kessler lit his pipe and secretly exalted in the remarkable progress of his patient.

He glanced up and Gorman was going over that special paper Kessler had prepared as a result of his interest in Gorman's case. Parallel statements. Excerpts from Hamlet that astonishingly resembled those made by Gorman who, at the time, had been almost an illiterate.

The original motivation for the paper had been Kessler's plan to write

a book based on the Gorman case. It seemed worthy of such treatment and, if handled properly, it might even become a bestseller.

Gorman: I got so I couldn't sleep. All night I had these dreams about being chased by Laramer, and it always ended up with my following him because he was scared of me.

Hamlet: Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting that would not let me sleep.

Gorman: I used to think I was crazy. Every thought seemed to fit into that one thing—I got to kill Laramer.

Hamlet: A document in madness: thoughts and remembrance fitted.

Gorman: I don't want anything to do with women. If I don't let them nab me, my mother will stop having men come around.

Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery!

Gorman: My father came to me in a dream and said you're old enough to do something. Don't let Laramer do these things to your mother.

Hamlet: Let not the royal bed of Denmark be a couch for luxury and damned incest!

What an amazing transformation, Kessler mused. Now Gorman comprehended emotionally and intellectually the basis of his compulsive murdering of Laramer. And now his attitude toward women would begin to change, just as Hamlet's had toward Ophelia.

Gorman understood so much, where before he had understood nothing, felt nothing but primitive hate.

Now that the old limbs had been cut from the tree, new, fresh, normal healthy limbs were free to grow.

Somewhere, someone was softly strumming a guitar.

Gorman looked up. His face glowed. "I figure that I, personally, am about at the grave-digging scene in Hamlet. You know, where the Prince begins to see things right, and understands how he feels, really feels, about Ophelia?"

"Yes." He even speaks so differently, Kessler thought. Carefully, almost like an actor.

Gorman hesitated only a moment, then whispered, "I think—think I'd like to see my mother."

Kessler sat up rather stiffly. "What? Why?"

"I've been thinking about her so much lately. I dream about her now. I thought of her and it made me cry yesterday." He went to the window and looked up at the evening sky. "Thy sin destroyeth thee."

Kessler stared at him, puzzled. And for some reason, a bit irritated. Then he got a flash of insight into himself. He had his own difficulties with women. He had married once and was divorced, and now he was unmarried. He had told himself that he remained single because he could not afford to devote necessary time to domesticity. Self-analytical work, however, seemed to reveal deeper motives, certain suggestions of hostility toward women. Now he recalled that one interview with Mrs. Gorman, and how vulgar and animal-like she had been—that is, as an impressive image. Not, of course, as a human being.

He managed quite successfully, he thought, in keeping his personal emotional problems out of his work. But for some reason now, he realized that he had been carefully keeping Mrs. Gorman out of this psychoanalytical process as much as possible.

And now, in retrospect, he recalled Mrs. Gorman's skirt, tight and revealing over wide hips, and the swell of large breasts, and the way her lips had curled as she invited him in. He had since felt only a sort of revulsion toward her because of her treatment of Richard, and her promiscuous, irresponsible nature.

"What was that, what did you say, Richard? Wasn't that part of a quotation from *Orestes*?"

Gorman half turned. "I think so. Anyway, I've been reading *Orestes* more and more, and thinking of my mother more. I'd like to see her. I feel different about her now. I feel like I could be—well—my real self with her now. But there's still this hostility toward girls. It isn't right. If I'm ever going to go back out there and live a normal healthy life, get married and have kids, I've got to like girls. That's an area that hasn't been dug into enough yet.. It ought to be cleared up. Sir, I'd like to talk with my mother again."

"I—I think it can be arranged."

"Has she wanted to see me?"

Kessler shifted uneasily. "Why—why, yes."

"When can I see her?"

"When would you like to see her, Richard?"

"Soon as I can. It's like I'd never known I even had a mother. I know that unless I get straightened out with her, I'll never get well. I'll never like girls. She's the key. Like in the books."

Pleased, but still a bit upset by something, Kessler stood up.

"I'll see if I can have her out here tomorrow evening. Visiting hours are from five to seven. You can entertain her here in your private cottage."

"Thank you, sir. I think I can learn a lot of important stuff from her."

At five after seven the following evening, Kessler saw Gorman striding eagerly up the graveled walk toward the front porch of the administrative building where Kessler sat at a marble-topped table sipping brandy and smoking his pipe. Gorman waved, then hurried on and jumped up the steps three at a time. This evening the boy seemed positively radiant.

Gorman sat down opposite Kessler and stretched his legs and stared through the trees shading into evening and at the silent bats dipping and weaving against the sky.

"Well," Kessler finally said, "was it as enlightening as you hoped it would be?"

"Yes. I think this thing about girls will clear up fast now."

"You had a good visit?"

"I knew it would be. I left her there. I wish you'd see her again before—"

"Before what?"

"Before something happens to everything."

Kessler studied the boy, the flushed face, his high look of joy.

Gorman said, "I want to explain something first. We—we made some mistakes. Basically you were right. I mean the Oedipus complex. It was a family thing. But it wasn't all that—you see—"

Kessler was pleased, happy at this indication of the boy's self-sufficiency in working out his own problems. "Did you expect me to be omniscient? For me to know everything, that is?"

"I over-idealized you for awhile, I think. But then I got to thinking of how we left mother out of the picture all along. I reread Orestes. And then I realized I didn't really have an Oedipus complex at all. It was an Orestes complex . . ."

Kessler frowned. "How do you figure that?"

"Aren't both those complexes sort of the same?"

"In a way. Both are varieties—"

"There's the over-attachment to mother," Gorman said, watching the bats. "The hatred for women, the guilt—like with Hamlet—"

"Hamlet didn't kill his mother," Kessler said, irritated again.

"He would have though," Gorman said. "In the Closet Scene, remember? That's when he kills Polonius. He was ready for murder—the murder of his mother—or he couldn't have done what he did. He didn't know Polonius was there. But he hears him and he turns and stabs him, right through the curtain, right then and there, kills him. Polonius was a substitute for Hamlet's mother. Just as Laramer was a substitute . . ."

Kessler tried to interject something, he wasn't quite sure what.

Gorman turned, his eyes glowing. "So you see it adds up now. Over-attachment to mother, then you have to kill her so you can be a man. So you can love another woman. It starts out attachment and ends up hate."

Gorman stood up and leaned toward Kessler, who felt an odd inability to move.

"When I was a kid, sex was taboo to me and my playmates. But it wasn't to her. She was no good. I dreamed I shot her with a rifle. I think of Orestes saying 'I kill thee not . . . thy sin destroyeth thee . . .'"

Kessler was running wildly down the curving gravel path, under blurring patches of shade and frozen green splotches of leaves. His breath came with difficulty, as if he were a fish out of water, as he ran down the steep path toward the private cottages by the little singing stream. His throat felt dry. There was some sort of terrible pressure in his chest as he ran, but he felt startlingly alive in some way, and his mind was frighteningly sharp.

Dimly behind him Gorman was running, following. His eager footsteps were unbelievably loud and cracklingly distinct on the gravel. And his voice called out over and over through the twilight like that of a plaintive child calling after an abandoning father.

Then Kessler was stumbling back out of the cottage and half-falling through the brush toward the rushing stream. He kept seeing Mrs. Gorman as something not human, lying there naked and lifeless on the bed. The limbs he saw as those of a partly broken statue found in an old ruin, and the threading lines of blood in her punctured face and from the knife wounds in her throat and breasts as cracks that appear in very ancient

statues, perhaps of Athena, that indicate authenticity and that cannot really appear in imitations.

It's odd, he thought, but it's the first time I ever could look upon a dead woman.

And then Kessler knew. I hated her too, he thought. I always hated women.

He fell to his knees, half in the cooling water—in a shade so thick, it was the entire world of night after sundown.

Gorman knelt beside him, squeezing his shoulder and sobbing with ecstatic joy.

"I'm really well now, really purged. It wasn't complete, sir, before. I feel so much better now than before, like I got wings."

Kessler lifted cool water up and let it trickle on his face. He seemed to hear a strange chorus chanting through the shade. His eyes closed in a moment of intense reverie. Of all the myths, he had been least interested in that of Orestes. It was the one Greek tragedy he had neglected, and had never bothered even recalling until now.

In Mycenae, Greece, after the Trojan War, wasn't it? And Orestes, that young man of high birth and noble appearance, murdered his mother. He told the worthy citizens that he had done this thing because of his mother, because she had dishonored his family. She was guilty of adultery. He was tried in the city of Athens and was acquitted, and the Furies who pursued Orestes seeking vengeance for the murder were called off by Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom.

"It's all right now," Gorman was saying from somewhere a long way off. "It was just the wrong complex. We thought it was one, but it was the other. Now it's straightened out, though, isn't it? Isn't it, sir?"

Kessler dipped his hands in the cooling water and watched it curl back in a slow heavy fashion from his fingers like crystal syrup, and he remembered who it had been who told the young noble Orestes to kill his mother.

The chorus seemed to rise to a crescendo all around, drowned his thought as he whispered, "Look at me, Richard. Look at me—don't you know—my name is Apollo . . . "

Fair Grounds for Murder

by Donald Olson

Hazel thought she was doing the right thing when she made up that story about why Rachel Crosscutt always won the blue ribbon at the Waranoga County Fair for her Indian Orange Preserve. At the time it seemed like a good idea. After all, what harm could it do?

It was not surprising that Arvida had believed it, since she, the youngest of the six sisters, had always been the most imaginative: the dreamer, the schemer, the yearner for impossible triumphs, the one who scorned the chances that did come her way because they never measured up to the grandiose notions of what she wanted. No job was glamourous enough (and it was a key to the impracticality of her nature that she could expect Millville to offer anything in the way of glamour), so she stayed on the farm with Mama and Papa, except for that one disastrous attempt to open Milady's Beauty Salon in Millville, for which Papa advanced the money despite the family's outspoken misgivings. They predicted that most of the women in that farm community would remain loyal to simple, warm-hearted Affie Winslow even if she did use her kitchen as a beauty parlor and doubled as postmistress. They were right. Milady's Beauty Salon was a fiasco, and after that unhappy venture Arvida stayed at home to dream of more successful enterprises, none of which ever materialized. As might be expected, she was disdainful of the county boys and remained a spinster.

The years went by, bearing into the pool of eternity Arvida's grand and not so grand dreams, along with three of her sisters and Mama and Papa, and the farm itself, of which nothing remained but the crumbling foundation, the stone-filled well, the mulberry tree, and the orchard that went on bearing golden apples that withered on the branch. Arvida now had a little house in town where she lived alone with an arthritic cat named Uncle Peter, and with the last of her dreams, a constant, abiding desire which over the years had become a driving obsession: to win the

blue ribbon at the Waranoga County Fair for Mama's Mint Jelly. Yes, the glorious dreams had been reduced to this one modest, parochial, not unattainable ambition, the one dream of them all that her two surviving sisters, Hazel and Ruby, did not dismiss as "nonsense."

The jelly was made to Mama's own secret recipe from a specially succulent mint that grew along the creek bed below the orchard on The Old Place. Making the annual supply of jelly for the whole family was a ritual entrusted to Arvida alone, who believed, mistakenly, that she was the only one who had the recipe, and Ruby and Hazel indulged her in this belief. There were times when they were nearly driven by exasperation to blurt out the truth, but they were truly fond of their sister and bore her foibles with patient understanding. It wasn't always easy. Lately her behavior had been verging on the eccentric, to say the least. She had become utterly indifferent to her own appearance and went all around town wearing that soiled blue housedress with the red piping all unstitched and dragging behind her like a rat's tail. Her muddy gray hair was a disgrace to womanhood, but wild horses, she declared, wouldn't drag her to Affie Winslow's kitchen for a permanent, nor to Affie's daughter's place next to the feed store. Why, if it weren't for those two, she was always saying, she'd be as famous as that Elizabeth Arden or that Helena Rubinstein.

Her vindictiveness was not limited to the Winslows. It took in almost every man, woman, and child in Waranoga County, but the special victims of her malice were, in this order, Mary Agnes Jones and Rachel Crosscutt; Rachel Crosscutt, because she invariably won the blue ribbon for her Indian Orange Preserve, and Mary Agnes Jones because she judged the preserves and jellies every year and consistently awarded the blue ribbon to Mrs. Crosscutt.

"It's got nothing to do with her Indian Orange Preserve," Arvida was fond of declaring. "It's just because Rachel Crosscutt's given so much money to the school. And if she hadn't pushed that stupid kid out of the way of that milk truck and had to spend the last ten years in a wheelchair it would be another story."

No one believed this invidious tale. Everyone who knew Mary-Agnes Jones, and most people did since she was head of the Home Economics Department at Apple Valley Central School, vouched for her scrupulous fairness and knew that if she perennially awarded the blue ribbon to Rachel Crosscutt's Indian Orange Preserve it was because she honestly

considered it superior to the other entries. As for Rachel Crosscutt, the only reason she continued to suffer the embarrassment of walking off with that blue ribbon year after year was that everyone insisted a champion had no right to quit, that she had an obligation to keep entering the competition until a challenger succeeded in breaking her record.

"High time they had another judge!" was another of Arvida's yearly declarations that won no support. The other regular entrants would not have felt they had truly won the blue ribbon if anyone but Mary Agnes Jones awarded it. Arvida had always grumbled but in the end acceded to this view of the matter. That is, until the last couple of years. By then her wistful ambition to win that blue ribbon had become the one fixed idea in a growing psychic turbulence. It was as if she were looking back and seeing for the first time all that she had missed, all that she had let slip through her fingers until there was nothing left but a crippled cat and a recipe for mint jelly. She was haunted by a galling sense of failure and began to imagine that everyone shared this opinion and that they were all laughing at her. Worst of all, Mama herself had begun to blame her for her failure to win.

Mama had begun to pay Arvida disturbing visits, usually at dusk, or in the first blue hour of evening when Arvida would look through the open bedroom door and see Mama's gently blurred figure rocking back and forth in the chair beside the bed, turning her head now and then to look back at Arvida with a compelling frown that conveyed better than words the old lady's displeasure. Mama would never be able to rest peacefully in her grave until Arvida had won the blue ribbon at the county fair.

The first time Arvida conveyed this extraordinary piece of news to Hazel, her sister had merely blinked and asked her what she had said.

"Are you deaf, Hae? I said Mama won't be able to sleep in peace until I've won that blue ribbon."

"Oh, Arvida, stop talking rubbish."

"It's true. She's mightily vexed because I haven't won the first prize for her mint jelly. And I don't blame her."

Hazel dropped her knitting, rubbed her eyes, groaned with discomfort. She was so fat she had to sit sideways in the chair, and her legs and ankles were so badly swollen she could wear nothing but bedroom slippers on her feet. "Arvida, honey, if you go around talking that way folks will think you're daft."

"Who cares what *they* think? It's what Mama thinks."

"Mama's in heaven. She's not thinking about mint jelly and blue ribbons."

"A lot you know about what she's thinking. For your information, she sat right in that rocker in there and *told* me what she thought."

Arvida said this so matter-of-factly Hazel felt a shiver run through her. She regarded her sister with a sympathetic but pained frown on her grandmotherly face. There had been signs before this: a certain vacancy in the eyes; a queer secretive gesture, as if she were scolding someone who wasn't there; ambiguous remarks. Hazel remembered all too well what had happened last year and the year before, the mortifying scenes Arvida had made right in the middle of the fairgrounds after the judging. The committee was seriously distressed; so was Hazel, but she didn't know quite what to do. Two of the members had already been to see Hazel, urging her to make every effort to persuade Arvida not to submit an entry this year. The unpleasantness simply had to be avoided.

Arvida hadn't even listened. Not to enter Mama's Mint Jelly was unthinkable. Arvida didn't even get mad. The idea was so preposterous she only laughed. Of course she must submit an entry.

Now, it has already been demonstrated that Hazel was not the most imaginative person in the world. Otherwise, she would have invented a more plausible story than she did to convince Arvida how useless it would be for her to enter the competition at the fairgrounds. Had she been more imaginative herself, she might have anticipated the effect her clumsy lie would have on Arvida's already dangerously overwrought imagination. What she told Arvida was this: there was no use entering her mint jelly in the competition because, no matter how good it was, it stood no chance of winning.

"Oh, there's always a chance," retorted Arvida. "Even if it is mighty slim."

"Not even a slim chance, honey. Not even a sliver of a chance. Because the whole thing is fixed."

Arvida shied away as if Hazel had stuck her with a pin. "Fixed?"

"Fixed. Mary Agnes Jones has agreed to let Rachel Crosscutt win the blue ribbon as many times as she wants, because Rachel promised to donate a whole new electric kitchen to the Home Ec Department of Apple Valley Central School."

"Who said so?"

"Someone as close to the horse's mouth as you can get without being bit. Nobody could prove it, of course, and most folks wouldn't even believe it if it could be proved, so don't you dare go shooting off your mouth about it. Just don't make a fool of yourself by carting anything out to those fairgrounds again. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Arv, but you are my little sister and I can't stand your constantly being hurt like that."

What Hazel, with her usual obtuseness, interpreted as grudging acquiescence on Arvida's part was not that at all, and as soon as Hazel went away, happily convinced that the perennial crisis in Floral Hall would never have to be faced again, Arvida began pacing back and forth from the front door of her little house to the rocking chair in the bedroom. She was in a serious quandary. If she didn't enter Mama's Mint Jelly in the county fair, Mama's spirit would never find rest, but she herself would die before she would be defrauded ever again by that mealy-mouthed cheat, Mary Agnes Jones. That's what she kept intoning to Uncle Peter as she paced back and forth: "I'd die first! I'd die first!"

As long as Arvida's wrath could be diffused over most of the population of Millville it was relatively harmless, but now it became focused on one individual: Mary Agnes Jones. Arvida's blood boiled when she thought of how her heart had nearly stopped beating every time she had watched Mary Agnes Jones dip her little silver spoon into Mama's Mint Jelly, pretending to judge its taste and color and consistency . . . *pretending*—when all the time she knew the blue ribbon was going to an entry she hadn't even looked at yet!

"Oh, I could *kill* her! I could *kill* her!"

She spoke with such caustic vehemence poor old Uncle Peter's tail began swinging like a pendulum gone crazy, although it was as purely rhetorical an outburst as when she had cried, "I'd die first!" Yet no one could have been more surprised than she when a moment later the words echoed in her mind with a somewhat different emphasis: *I could* kill her . . . *I could* kill her.

If Mary Agnes Jones were dead she wouldn't be able to judge next year's competition; and if it weren't for Mary Agnes Jones, Mama's Mint Jelly would win the blue ribbon. Oh, why hadn't she thought of this idea last year?

Perhaps if the rocking chair had not been there to remind her of Mama's visits in the blue hour of evening, and perhaps if the arsenic had not been

down there in the cellar where it had been ever since that invasion of rats after The Big Flood, perhaps she would never have done it. But the rocking chair was there and so was the arsenic, and there wasn't a chance in a million it could be laid to her. The idea was foolproof since the entries were all lined up on that long table in Floral Hall, sealed till the time of judging, when Mary Agnes Jones would travel down the line with her little silver spoons, tasting a generous sample or two of each entry and then announcing her decision shortly thereafter. The blue ribbon was awarded and the honorable mentions declared. The blue ribbon winner was put on display and the others, including the honorable mentions, could be removed whenever the entrants wished. Most of the rejected entries were whisked away at once, as if in shame.

Oh, it was an ingenious scheme! Arvida knew enough about arsenic to know how much to put in the jelly to be sure it was a lethal dose. By the time Mary Agnes Jones was dead and they got around to analyzing the contents of her stomach, if they did, they'd have no way of telling which of the two dozen or so jellies and jams had contained the poison. By that time Arvida would have hurried home, washed the rest of the mint jelly down the drain, and scoured the jar clean.

Making the jelly was twice as much fun that year. When Arvida went alone at dusk to gather the mint along the creek bed she sat dreaming on the foundation of The Old Place, while the wind whispered over the empty fields and sighed among the gnarled branches of the apple trees.

When she told her sister, on the day before the submission of entries, Hazel's fat face expanded, her eyes bugging out so they seemed in danger of rolling off her lids and down into the yawning cavern of her mouth.

"Arvida! You promised me you wouldn't."

"Never did no such thing."

"Oh, yes, you did, right here in this very room!"

"You've been hearing things, Hae. Must be hardening of the arteries. They'll be sticking you away in Holly Hill if you aren't careful."

"But you can't! I've told them. I've told them you wouldn't."

Arvida shrugged. "The more fool you. Mama would never rest if I didn't enter."

Hazel's face was blotched with crimson. "You can't possibly win. I told you that."

Arvida tossed her mane of muddy grey hair and gave her sister an impish, superior grin. "It matters not if you win or lose, it's how you play

the game. If I don't win this year there's always next year."

There was something funny about all this and Hazel didn't like it. She had forebodings of disaster, of public disgrace. Something would have to be done quickly. She went away sorely troubled.

The day of the judging was also the last day of the county fair. The most popular events were over and many of the exhibits had already been removed from the fairgrounds, which were hot and dusty and pungent with the mingled odors of barnyard and carnival. The midway was still thronged and there were crowds three and four deep around the cold drink stands. Every kid who went by was licking a cone or popsicle.

It was no cooler in Floral Hall, where only a furtive rank breeze came through the open double doors. Arvida sat with Hazel and Hazel's husband Kenneth on folding chairs just inside the door. Poor Hazel looked wretchedly uncomfortable with her vast bulk spread over two of the chairs, dangerously taxing their strength. Ruby and her whole family were here too, and Arvida was displeased. It made her edgy having them here, darting those slyly expectant looks at her every now and then as if waiting for her to do something outrageous, maybe start foaming at the mouth when she didn't win, but she was as meek as could be. She smiled sweetly at everyone who came through the door, even at Rachel Crosscutt, who was wheeled in by her grandson Timothy, preceded by a chorus of ohs and ahs and comments like, "Here she is," and "Rachel Crosscutt just came in." As if she were a queen or something! Arvida forced herself to keep smiling and tried not to look too often at the jar of Mama's Mint Jelly glowing like bottled emeralds on the snowy tablecloth.

She had made her feelings crystal clear. She had no intention, she had said, of sitting there like a bump on a log, once the judging had begun. She wouldn't trust herself not to make a fuss. Instead, she would go down by the grandstand and sit on that bench under the catalpa tree where it was cooler and she wouldn't be so fidgety. The instant the so-called "judging" was over, Hazel was to retrieve Arvida's exhibit from the table and bring it down to her. *Immediately*. She hoped she had got that through Hazel's thick head.

Hazel seemed a bit testy herself today. The heat was too much for her. "If you think I'm going to pick up my feet and *run* all the way across the fairgrounds on a day like this—or any other day—you've got another think coming."

"You don't have to *run*. Nobody said anything about your running. I

just said to come at *once*, not to loiter."

"If you're in such a dither to get home you should have let me hold the bench for you and Hitch could do your chasing around."

The minute Mary Agnes Jones put in an appearance Arvida got up to leave. She turned to give Hazel a last-minute reminder.

"I'll scream if I don't get out of here. Now mind, you fetch my jar of jelly to me the second it's over. If you don't make tracks to the grandstand with my exhibit, I'm going to come back up here and raise such a fuss you won't be able to hold your head up in public for a year! I'll tell everybody within shouting distance all about the electric kitchen and the whole shabby story. I mean that, Hae."

With that, she stalked out of Floral Hall and made her way across the fairgrounds to the bench where Ruby's grandson Hitch was stretched out with his eyes shut, licking a popsicle that was dripping all over him—the bribe Arvida had given him to keep the bench for her till she got there. Now she shooed him away and sat down. It was really a pleasant spot, so cool and shady under the catalpa tree. She wished she had stopped for a glass of lemonade. Oh well, it wouldn't be long now. There was much to watch. The loop-the-loop was just a few yards away and it was fun to watch those nitwit girls in short skirts making silly fools of themselves. The fair was reaching its peak this afternoon, a sort of mad, frantic gaiety throbbing itself out under the raging sun. Soon the dust and the noise would begin to settle, the crowds would dwindle away, shadows would lengthen across the deserted fairgrounds and it would all be over for another year. But next year! Next year would be different!

More and more frequently now, Arvida glanced up toward Floral Hall, a corner of which she could see from the bench. It should be over by now. It *must* be over by now. Where in Sam Hill was that woman? Hazel, Hazel, Hazel, why don't you come?

Finally she did, at a maddeningly slow pace on her swollen legs. Arvida squinted at the sunlight reflected off glass and metal. Liquid waves of heat undulated visibly in the dusty air. She leaned forward, vexed at the fools who kept getting between her and the tiresomely slow mass of her sister. At last, she got a clear view of her—but where was the jelly? Oh, if that silly cow had forgotten to fetch it . . .

She got up as Hazel huffed and puffed toward her, making weary, listless fanning motions with a hanky the size of a butternut leaf.

"Hazel! Where is it? *Where is my exhibit?*"

Hazel seemed not to hear.

"My jelly! My jelly!" shrieked Arvida, giving the blubbery arm a rude shake.

Hazel was grinning the most foolish, idiotic grin Arvida had ever seen on the face of man or beast. Oh, she was infuriating!

"Go back! Go back and fetch my jelly, you fool! Go—"

"No use," gasped Hazel, sinking blissfully onto the bench under the catalpa tree, the perspiration running off her triple chins.

"Will you get up off that bench this minute and—"

"Arvida! Will you kindly let me get my breath? Stop jumping around and poking at me. I can't take your exhibit away."

"Hasn't the judging been announced? You should have stayed till it was—"

"Yes, yes, it's over. But you've got to leave yours there. Arvida, it *won!* You won the blue ribbon!"

Arvida looked more horrified than happy, as if it were the last thing on earth she wanted to hear.

Well, *that's gratitude*, thought Hazel, thinking how she had practically got down on her knees and *begged* the committee to award Arvida the blue ribbon just this once. They had finally agreed, bless them. It wasn't fair to the others but they had finally agreed it was the only way to solve the vexing problem so it wouldn't happen another year. Let Arvida have her precious blue ribbon. Heaven knows what the bedeviled thing would do if she didn't once take home the prize.

"You're lying!" cried Arvida. "Lies! Lies!"

"No, dear, it's the truth. You won the blue ribbon for Mama's Mint Jelly. There! Ask Kenneth. He'll tell you. Here he comes now."

Kenneth had news all right. He was running! Fat as he was, and with that sun boiling down as fiercely as it was, he was running. Hazel shook her head. Why on earth should he *run*? He was almost up to them now, but he didn't look at all like the bearer of glad tidings. Quite the contrary; he looked as if something terrible had happened.

After the Unfortunate Accident

by Barry N. Malzberg

After the unfortunate accident I find myself sitting in a large room, rows and rows of straight-back chairs and a movie-screen in front, set up flat against the wall. The room seems half-filled or a little more with people who I do not recognize, some of them slumped over in attitudes of catatonia or boredom, others smoking cigarettes and regarding the pictures running on the screen with varying degrees of interest. Still appalled by what has happened to me—until that moment I had never lost control of a car in my life—I concentrate upon the movies, trying to restore some sense of order.

The movies, it seems, are films of my own family when I was a boy; scenes I dimly recognize float before me and in jarring close-ups I see the face of my mother, my sister and myself, superimposed against backgrounds of the sea or heavy traffic, embarrassed grins against the facades of the various apartment buildings we occupied throughout the first twenty years of my life. Now and then my father appears in these scenes but only rarely; he did not trust anyone else to hold the camera and became embarrassed when placed before it.

The movies remind me how intensely boring I found not only my early years but the principle of the family home movie itself which in its ability to trap people in the smallest and least significant particles of their lives has always managed to cheapen emotion, deaden any sense of connection. I note for the first time how unpleasantly cramped the room is; how penetrating the cigarette odors, how disconcerting the whine of the projector as it ticks off from the booth behind me and I decide at this moment that I do not want to stay any longer; that I must try to leave this room but when I attempt to stand I find that I am rooted to the chair and this brings from me a squawl of terror which attracts attention all around and I find that as the movies grind on, I am being stared at by many people in the room. "Excuse me," I say; showing my palms, "I didn't mean to

shout. It was only the circumstances—”

“You’ll ruin everything,” a fat man in front of me says, turning, glaring at me. “Just because you’re new here is no reason to scream. Now attend to yourself and watch the pictures; you’ll find some of these very interesting and in any case it’s your life which is being shown so you could use a little respect.”

“Don’t be so rough on the boy,” a woman beside me says. She is rather attractive although in no sexual fashion; perhaps *motherly* is the word I am seeking. “He is new here and it’s always a bit of a shock for them. I remember how *you* were when you came in,” she adds sharply and the fat man blushes, turns around toward the screen again, his shoulders hunched. “Don’t worry about it,” the woman says. “He’s just nasty-tempered, like so many of them here. He died of a bad fall, I understand, and the suicides are always the most offensive. How did *you* die?” she says but with such concern and interest that I do not find the question offensive. “You’re awfully young.”

“I missed a curve in the rain in an old Dodge,” I say, “and ran off the road. The last thing I remember is heading toward a tree so I guess I must have been killed instantly. I never lost control of a car before.”

“Well,” she says nodding, “it is always a shock. Still, you’re perfectly comfortable here as you can see and the movies are fairly interesting so it wasn’t that bad for you after all. You’ll find that you’re never hungry or thirsty or need to sleep so you can just watch the movies all the time so all in all it worked out pretty nicely. I was afraid of death like everyone but if I had known that it was this pleasant afterwards I wouldn’t have fought so hard; I would have had the operation and might even have been saved. Still,” she says, shaking her head, “who’s to say? The important thing is that after you’ve been here for a few days it will feel like forever. You’ll be one of us.”

I look back toward the screen where a shore scene is now playing; my sister and I are tossing a large beachball in the air and through layers of recollection, it comes back to me that it was at this very beach, possibly on this very afternoon, that I broke her nose with a cruelly-thrown softball. My sister and I wave at the cameras, run toward them mischievously and then out of the scene. There is a slow pan, one of my father’s amateur specialties, and then the scene switches to my mother in bathing-suit, lying on a raft, waving.

“This is horrible,” I find myself saying to the woman, “I can’t spend

an eternity watching this stuff; I always hated it."

She says nothing, absorbed in the film. Desperately, I turn in my chair and look toward the projectionist's booth and at just that instant the projectionist is looking out, head and shoulders protruding, checking the audience while the film rolls. The projectionist—how could I have doubted it?—is my father. I have not seen him in five years.

"Dad!" I shriek impulsively, focusing his attention with a wave, and locking my gaze with his. "Dad, you've got to get me out of this!" Despite our years of separation I retain my ability to cut to the bone of all discussions with my father. "I can't spend eternity looking at family home movies; I hated them! You've got to get me out of this; there's been some mistake! This is hell!"

My father looks at me through layers of smoky darkness, his eyes shrouded and gives me a long, intense smile. "No, son," he says, waving at me before he disappears forever back into the booth, "you don't understand at all." His eyes twinkle with happiness; I remember how he loved to show the movies. "This is heaven."



A Professional

by Robert McKay

Troy Mason was a stickup man—a professional. He was thirty now, and for the past three years he had hit nothing but banks.

From age twenty-four to twenty-seven he had been in prison. From twenty to twenty-four he had heisted loan companies, mostly, and an occasional supermarket. He had been lucky, he knew now, because in the beginning he had known nothing and should have been caught immediately. But then when his luck held he had gradually learned his trade, and the fall at twenty-four had been a fluke, really, the way it always is when a professional gets nailed.

Mason was not a rebel, and he was not a neurotic or compulsive criminal. In prison he had listened impatiently while other cons explained why they stole or killed or committed various stupid and messy crimes.

To Mason, crime was a business and a way of life. He felt no more need to justify himself than a lawyer would. He had decided long ago that he was not against society; rather, he was outside society. Society's laws and values had nothing to do with him.

He was intelligent, and, like all intelligent men who have spent much time behind bars, he was well and widely read. He knew that the penologists and sociologists and psychiatrists looked with icy disfavor on men with minds like his. So he had kept his mouth shut in the pen and had beaten the tests and the interviews, and he had never been tagged with the label that might have kept him there for the maximum of his two-to-ten year sentence. The kiss-of-death label was Criminal Psychopath. Sitting motionless and intent now in his darkened room, peering through the sleazy curtain at the bank across the street, Mason grinned wryly, remembering some of the things he had read in certain psychology books.

He glanced at his watch. 7:46. Gaine was a minute late. But then a tall, thin figure hurried around the corner and up to the door of the Fidelity Trust Company, East Side Branch. Dependability was a prime

requisite for bank managers, and after two weeks of daily study Mason was convinced that Harry Gaine was utterly dependable.

Mason knew a great deal about the bank manager, most of which he would never use. He knew that Harry Gaine had a plump wife and a skinny daughter out in the suburbs, and a '62 sedan parked in the lot around the corner. He knew that Gaine had to open two locks with two keys before he could enter the bank, and he knew that the unlocking took at least six seconds.

He knew also that a police car cruised by at 7:55 looking for the raised venetian blind in the bank's front window and the closed blind on the door. But there was one thing about Harry Gaine that Troy Mason did not know.

This morning at eight sharp, as always, fat Ben Griffin, the janitor, knocked on the bank door and was admitted. And since Mason couldn't send his eyes into the bank with Ben Griffin he couldn't learn the one fact about Harry Gaine he needed most to know.

"Dammit, Mr. Gaine! I wish you'd get rid of that thing," the janitor said. That thing was a .45 caliber army automatic lying on the bank manager's desk. "This bank ain't never gonna be held up," the janitor complained. "And if it is, you know you ain't gonna shoot it out with a gang of bandits. Besides, we got strict orders not to resist if there's a stickup."

Gaine didn't bother to answer. He knew better than Griffin just how seriously he was violating bank policy by keeping the gun. But he knew too that he had lived ten years with the shame of being held up by a sixteen-year-old boy carrying a twenty-two rifle with a broken firing pin, and the pistol was Harry Gaine's insurance against ever again being made to suffer that kind of humiliation.

The bank manager was a proud and ambitious man. He had no intention of shooting it out with a gang, but he also had no intention of letting some hopped-up punk trample all over him again. So he kept the automatic in his desk drawer. Occasionally, before the girls arrived, he took it out and looked at it, and thought about what he might do with it if somebody tried to stick up the bank with a toy pistol or even a twenty-two.

At 8:10 a car stopped in front of the bank and two women got out. Big red-haired Bessie Tryson leaned back into the car to kiss her husband goodbye. The other one, a pretty blond named Alice Michaels, skipped across the sidewalk and rapped on the door. Bessie was the cashier and

Alice was a teller.

Between 8:15 and 8:30 three other girls entered the bank. They were all young and it was unlikely that any of them would make trouble. But the bank had a holdup alarm, and Troy knew he would have to convince all of them, especially Gaine and Bessie Tryson, that pushing the button would be the most foolish thing they could possibly do.

At ten o'clock, after the bank had been open for an hour, Troy finally left the window and shaved. He brushed his thick, crew-cut black hair and put on a conservative blue suit. Then he walked the five blocks to where he kept his two-year-old car, and was out of the neighborhood as unnoticeably as possible.

Troy drove slowly through the grey, dirty streets. The snow was gone but today spring seemed far away. He felt suddenly anxious and impatient. It hit him like this occasionally in the dull, tight waiting period. And it brought in him a fierce urge for a drink, for a woman, for warmth of some kind. It wasn't anything he couldn't control, but it was a nuisance, and it bothered him against his will.

To preserve his anonymity in the city, he had to cut himself off from all but the most impersonal contacts. He went to the movies instead of night clubs, and he had learned long ago that nowhere was his personal privacy so respected as it was in a public library.

And the library was where he headed now, after breakfast in a small restaurant. Sometimes he tried to imagine what the gentle librarians would say if they knew they were providing cover for a bank robber. Inside the library he strode purposefully toward the technical department, and was soon deep in the performance figures of the SL 300.

A sudden sharp blow on top of his head brought him out of his chair in a whirling rush. Behind his chair stood a girl, her arms piled high with books, her eyes frantic with apology and embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry," she said, her face flaming.

Troy grinned at her. "Forget it," he said. He picked up the book that had bounced off his head and started to put it back on the pile in her arms; then, instead, he lifted off half the books she was holding and said, "Where do you want these?"

"On my desk," she whispered, and Troy realized he was speaking in his normal voice, attracting the kind of attention he went to great lengths to avoid. Frowning, he followed the girl around the table to the desk at the other end of the room.

"Thank you," she said, putting down her load of books. "The director would have a fit if she knew I dropped a book on a patron's head."

"You work here?" Not actually pretty, she had a sensuous mouth and a provocative walk that didn't fit Troy's conception of librarians.

"I'm the assistant tech librarian," she said, blushing again under his scrutiny. She might look like a ball of fire, Troy thought, but she acts like a thirteen-year-old at the Freshman Prom.

He forgot her, for perhaps an hour, until he looked up from his book, down the length of the room, straight into her eyes. She dropped her gaze instantly. He watched her, seeing the color creep into her cheeks, noting the severely tailored suit she wore, wondering if she wore it in a futile attempt to camouflage her figure. She looked about twenty-four or -five. Her hair, the color of rusty wheat straw, she wore piled haphazardly on top of her head. Her eyes, he remembered, were brown. You didn't expect brown eyes with hair like that. You expected hazel.

She raised her hand to tuck in a wisp of that shining hair, and Troy Mason felt his breath turn to a solid lump in his throat. A tingling emptiness opened inside him.

'Forget it! he thought. This dame could get to me, but right.

At three o'clock he stood up and put his books back in the shelves. The girl hadn't looked at him again, and it was just as well. Because once in a great while you looked into a girl's eyes and saw something there—a picture of yourself, maybe. And you and the girl knew immediately that something deep and explosive could happen between you. It had happened to him when he was young—very young, he thought now, but not recently. And he couldn't afford to let it happen now.

The next day, Friday, he moved out of the rooming house across from the bank and checked into the largest commercial hotel in the city. His luggage was a battered two-suiter, and a briefcase. The two-suiter had a false bottom concealing a compartment two inches deep. But it was so cleverly built that the bag looked symmetrical, both open and closed. It had cost a fortune and was worth it.

The following morning, carrying the briefcase, he left the hotel at six-thirty. He ate a leisurely breakfast at a restaurant a few blocks away, walked six blocks to another restaurant, and spent an hour there reading the papers and drinking coffee. Then he walked slowly back to the hotel. It was a routine he would follow every morning for a week. He wanted the hotel employees to accustom themselves to seeing him leave and

return each morning with the briefcase. The week also served to divorce him from the neighborhood of the bank, by time as well as distance. After the stickup he would remain at the hotel for a couple of days until the heat was off. It was the old Purloined Letter principle, and it was the only way to hide after a bank job.

The bad part of the waiting was that he sometimes got to thinking too much about what it would be like in the bank. He knew what the actuality would be, the fierce exhilaration that would come once he was inside and in control. But when he was waiting and thinking about it, it was too easy to start imagining what it *might* be like if somebody started screaming, or if a cop busted in . . .

Monday morning he went back to the library, knowing he must not involve himself with the girl, telling himself he wanted only to read, recognizing the lie; and going anyway.

She was at her desk when he walked in, her eyes acknowledging his presence, welcoming him, almost. He wanted to smile but his face felt stiff. By the time he did smile, she had looked down, and he stood there grinning foolishly at the top of her head. The hayrick hairdo hadn't changed, unless for the worse. The idea that a woman could be so inept, or so unmindful, was suddenly poignantly and strangely exciting.

Man! he thought. This is crazy. This is kid stuff.

After awhile he stood up, keeping his mind closed to what he was doing, walked to her desk, and said, "Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"Why, I . . ." She blushed magnificently. But she didn't seem embarrassed. "Why, all right. Yes, I will," she said. "Yes, I'd like to." She laughed—a rich bubble of a laugh. "I didn't intend to make it quite so emphatic," she said. "I'll be through at six. You can wait for me at the main entrance if you like."

Outside, he walked quickly away from the library, five blocks in a straight line. What am I doing? he raged at himself. And what kind of a dame is that? A respectable girl working in a library, who is ready to go out with the first guy that asks her.

He walked furiously, letting himself feel the edge of the feeling that would be all through him next Friday morning. In three days you'll lay your life on the line for a bag full of money, he told himself. You've got to be ready to do anything you have to do. Now just what do you think you're doing mooning around some calf-eyed, corn-fed librarian?

She came out at six on the dot, looking smaller and slimmer than he remembered her. The heavy coat she wore concealed the deep curves of her body and she looked fragile and young.

"My name is Felicity Warren," she said as they walked down the steps. He gave her the name he was using at the hotel. They ate at a downtown restaurant, not too fancy. She ate more than he did. There was hunger in him but not for food. She unbuttoned her suit jacket and through her sheer blouse he could see the high swell of her breasts. He looked at her hair. It was alive and golden like ripe wheat in the sun, and now its disarray was infinitely seductive.

They talked a little through the dinner, but afterward Troy couldn't remember what they said. Over coffee, though, she told him about herself, and he paid attention to that and remembered all of it. She was twenty-six; had never been married, lived alone, wanted some day to get married, wanted lots of kids, hated the tech department, loved music, believed in God, was often lonely, knew she had a sexy body, thought she had a homely face, and sometimes was bleakly certain that she was doomed to chilly spinsterhood.

But she couldn't have said all that, Troy thought, as he lay in bed later that night. And he knew that she hadn't actually said all those things, but he knew they were all true.

When he took her home she put her key in the door and turned to him with a smile, looking like a little girl again, bundled in her heavy coat. He put his hands on her shoulders and bent slowly to her lips. He kissed her tentatively, wonderingly. He forced himself to smile. He bent and kissed her again, barely touching her lips. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said and abruptly turned and left her there at the door.

But the next morning he knew he couldn't see her again. He didn't understand what had happened between him and Felicity Warren. He didn't think he believed in love. But whatever it was, he knew it couldn't exist side by side with the sawed-off shotgun and the icy violence of the bank job. Afterward maybe . . . Maybe afterward he could cross over and live for a while in the warm trembling world of Felicity Warren.

The rest of Tuesday went by and all of Wednesday and most of Thursday. Only on Wednesday night, halfway between waking and sleep, did she steal into his mind and dominate it for an unknown length of time before he fell all the way asleep.

Troy awoke at five and lay in the dark, not sleeping, trying to keep his

mind empty until the little traveler's clock buzzed at quarter till six. He got up and shaved quickly, still not thinking about what lay ahead. He put on the pants of his blue suit, a white shirt, and a dark tie. Then he opened the suitcase and pressed the concealed catches to release the false bottom.

There, snugly bracketed, lay the sawed-off shotgun. It was a twelve gauge gun, double barreled, less than eighteen inches long from the worn walnut of its curved pistol grip to the gaping twin muzzles. He took six bright red-and-brass shotgun shells from their elastic loops, broke the gun and loaded it, and dropped the other four shells into his pocket.

He packed the briefcase with a light trenchcoat, a rolled-up felt hat, and a plain grey laundry bag. He put in his pocket the rubber nose plugs and cheek pads. Finally, he brought out the elaborate shoulder harness for the shotgun. It was a shoulder holster in reverse, his own design. The butt of the gun rested in a leather cup which hung just below his belt. The barrels were held in a leather loop, two inches from the muzzle, right up under his arm.

Mason could put his hand through the slit pocket of the trenchcoat, grasp the pistol grip, lift up to get it out of the cup, let it drop four inches to disengage the barrels from the loop, and swing the muzzle out between the buttons of his coat. He could do this in one smooth motion, faster than the average cop could draw from his belt holster.

He left the hotel at six-thirty and caught a bus to the neighborhood where he had parked his car. He got into the car. Letting the motor warm, he slipped out of his topcoat and into the trenchcoat. As he pulled away from the curb it was 7:20.

Troy drove slowly up one street and down the other, putting on his hat, and shoving the rubber plugs in his nostrils and putting the pads in his cheeks. At a corner he surveyed himself in the rear-view mirror. His nose looked broad and flat. His cheeks were rounded almost comically, his eyes seemed to sag and his mouth looked wider and thinner. It was not a disguise guaranteed to keep an eyewitness from recognizing him in a line-up. But he was determined never to appear in another line-up. The disguise served admirably to prevent verbal descriptions from pinpointing him.

At 7:47 Harry Gaine came briskly around the far corner. Troy let the bank manager get nearly to the door before he swung out of the car. The sun had burned through the long-March overcast and its sharp, glancing

light filled the street. The sweet purity of the light flooded Troy's mind with a sudden dazzling image of Felicity. O.K., he thought. Maybe this will be the last one.

He reached through the slit pocket of the trenchcoat, freed the shotgun, and stepped up to Harry Gaine just as the bank manager turned the key in the second lock.

"I'm going in with you, Gaine," he said in a flat voice. "Don't try anything."

The bank manager's head swiveled slowly, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. Troy showed him an inch of the twin barrels. "Now get inside before I kill you," he said.

Gaine looked up and met Troy's eyes. He stared into them. Then he opened the door and they went in together. "Now just take it easy," Troy said in a conversational tone. "Play it smart and stay alive for that wife and daughter of yours."

The bank manager stared at him. He was pale and his mouth had a fine rapid tremor. He's scared, Troy thought, but I'll have to be careful with him.

The bank was a single large room, divided by the barred row of tellers' windows. A swinging half-door led to the office space. Set into the end wall was the massive door of the vault.

"Now open the venetian blind just the way you always do," Troy said, smiling.

At three minutes to eight the cruiser went by. Peeping through the blinds of the door, Troy watched the cops glance perfunctorily at the bank window. At five after eight the janitor rapped on the door. Troy opened it, standing behind it until the janitor was inside. Then he closed the door and showed the janitor the shotgun.

"Just go over and stand beside your boss, Ben, and you won't get hurt."

Ben Griffin's face looked like dirty bread dough. "Don't—don't shoot!" he croaked, putting fluttering hands, palms out, between his belly and the frightening muzzles of the twelve-gauge.

"Shut up and get over there," Troy snapped. He held the gun fully in the open now, letting the two men hypnotize themselves with the shocking, vicious look of it.

Bessie Tryson and Alice Michaels came next. Alice Michaels knocked on the glass door while Bessie Tryson was still out in the street talking to her husband through the car window. Troy let the pretty blonde wait

while he cursed Bessie for her long-windedness. Alice Michaels knocked again, sharply. Rage and quick alarm gripped Troy. Bessie was still leaning through the window of the car. Troy opened the door. Alice came part way in, then turned around to call, "Come on, Bessie!" Troy stood frozen. If the girl saw him now . . .

Alice stood for an eternity, halfway inside the door, waiting for Bessie. Then Troy heard rapid heels on the sidewalk and both women came in, laughing. Their laughs died in tortured gasps. He didn't point the shotgun directly at them.

"Just take it easy, girls," he said softly. "Nobody's going to get hurt, so don't scream or do anything silly."

Bessie watched him coolly and attentively. Alice started to cry. She continued to cry the whole time, but she cried quietly and decently, and Troy didn't worry about her.

The three young girls came in one at a time. They looked at him with round, astonished eyes and took their places obediently against the wall.

"Now listen to me, all of you," Troy said, his voice grating harshly in his own ears. "I know this place is bugged and I know where the buttons are. Don't anybody try to push one. If the cops come, the first person I'll shoot will be the one who pushed the button."

He made his voice colder. "Now all of you get in there." He motioned with the gun toward the swinging door and the office space. "Sit down at your desks." He looked at his watch. "The time lock will be off in three minutes; right, Harry?" Gaine didn't answer. The pallor was gone from the manager's face. He had a set, angry expression, eyes flashing.

At 8:31 Troy said, "Open the vault, Harry." Gaine returned his gaze stubbornly, not moving. "Open it," Troy said, pointing the shotgun very deliberately at the bank manager's stomach.

"Oh, do as he says, Harry!" cried Bessie Tryson in an urgent voice. "Can't you see he's a killer?"

Troy felt a startling sense of shock. For an instant he glimpsed Felicity's eyes staring at him in amazement. Angrily he shook the vision away.

Gaine was at the vault twirling the combination. The great door swung silently open. This was the end of the rainbow!

"All right, Gaine. You go over there and sit down again."

He flipped the laundry bag to Alice Michaels. "You go in the vault, Alice, and fill the sack with everything you've got except the ones and the silver."

She stood up, still crying, looking helplessly toward Harry Gaine. The bank manager nodded grimly. "Go ahead, Alice. Do what he tells you."

Alice disappeared inside the vault. Troy shifted to where he could see her. She was sobbing quietly as she dropped stacks of bills into the laundry bag.

"Don't miss any of the big bills now, honey," he called. "I'm coming in there to take a look when you're through, and I won't like it if you try to hold out on me."

She glanced around at him fearfully. Then she picked up a fat canvas and leather money bag and stuffed it into the laundry bag. Troy felt a hot, bursting excitement.

He kept his eyes on Harry Gaine as much as he could. The manager sat motionless and tense behind his big desk. His lined face was tautly angry. He looked to Troy, like a man with something on his mind.

Troy glanced impatiently into the vault. He couldn't hurry the girl who was stuffing all that lovely green into his bag, but he was impatient to be finished.

"Is that vault ventilated?" he asked.

Gaine nodded reluctantly.

Alice Michaels came out of the vault carrying the bulging sack. Now it hit him—that wild, roaring sense of triumph he had been waiting for. His last job and his best one!

He turned to take the bag from the girl. But she recoiled from him involuntarily, and the bag fell to the floor. He bent and picked it up. Straightening, he heard a sound. Before he could act, the room exploded in a deafening blast. A sledgehammer crashed high against his back. Dazed and astounded, he fell blindly through space.

Troy was on his hands and knees. He knew he had been shot but he couldn't tell where. There was no pain. He braced himself for the awful shock of the next bullet. When it didn't come he raised himself numbly, twisting, the shotgun ready in his right hand. His left arm hung leaden and numb. The money bag was gone. But right now he didn't want the money. He wanted the man who had shot him.

Harry Gaine was standing behind his desk, working frantically at the slide of a big blue .45. Troy leveled the sawed-off shotgun, his finger curling around the single trigger. Gaine looked up. His eyes bulged. His mouth flew open. And the slide on the .45 snapped back to firing position.

But it was too late.

Troy's finger tightened on the trigger. And in the instant between life and death, while the .45 started to swing on the deadly arc toward him, Troy in one fantastic jump moved almost the full distance that separated him from Felicity Warren.

I don't have to kill him! The thought blazed in his mind. I can drop the gun and quit!

With the thought clear and sharp in his mind, he pressed the trigger. The shotgun boomed, and kicked nearly out of his hand. Harry Gaine was driven violently backward. Nine double-O buckshot slugs, each as big as a .32 bullet, tore into his chest and throat.

Alice Michaels screamed once and fainted. Bessie sat bloodless, staring. Ben Griffin was on the floor, scrabbling to force his flabby bulk between two desks.

Troy wheeled. His left arm hung numb. Blood ran off his fingertips in a stream. His coat sleeve was sodden with blood; the poplin looked black where the blood was soaking through. A dull monstrous pain was coming now, high in his shoulder.

It seemed to him a long time since the sledge hammer had knocked him down, but he knew that it had been probably fifteen seconds. His mind worked clear and cold. He saw on the floor the gray laundry bag with the money in it. Ignoring the others in the room, he holstered the shotgun, scooped up the bag, and left the bank.

The sun was bright in the street. A woman stood on the opposite curb, staring at him. She was hatless and very blond and the sun on her hair reminded him of Felicity.

Everything was clear and cold in his mind. The hotel was out now. Felicity was out. There was nothing left now but the car and the shotgun and the money and the dead bloody arm.

It had all come down to this narrow instant, as he had always known it someday would. And now—striding quickly to the car, aware that he was staggering slightly and bleeding on the sidewalk—he knew that he had no chance.

The car started at the touch of his foot. He eased away from the curb, steering with his right hand, his left arm and shoulder a mass of pain now. The bright-haired woman stood frozen at the curb across from the bank. He thought of Felicity again, for the last time. The street was still empty. But behind him, faintly, he heard the first rising wail of the sirens.

Where the Finger Points

by Jack Ritchie

We endured the reading of the will and then James Watson placed the original copy on the table before him. "Your uncle dearly loved his house—these grounds. It was his hope that if his nephews were required to spend a year here, perhaps one of them might decide to reside here permanently and maintain the place in its present condition."

Orville Crawford frowned. "The three of us in this house for one year? Impossible."

Freddie agreed. "We detest each other. Uncle Benthaney was quite aware of that. We'll probably kill each other before the year is out."

"Nevertheless," Watson said. "The will stipulates that all of you live in this house for one year. If any one of you fails to meet the residence requirements, at the end of the year his share of the estate shall be equally distributed among the survivors . . ." He quickly corrected himself. ". . . among those who remain."

There was one other interesting codicil and Watson chose to repeat it. "And, of course, if none of you fulfill the one-year residence . . . for one reason or another . . . the entire estate will go to Amantha Desfounaines."

Naturally, at this point, we again glared at Amantha.

She was dark-haired, taller than average, and her face remained composed as we stared. She had been my uncle's housekeeper for the period of four months preceding his death. It was difficult to estimate her age, but I thought that the early thirties might be a fair guess. And I thought I detected the sparkle of a smile in her pitch-black eyes.

I turned to Watson. "I understand that at my uncle's death an autopsy was performed."

The admission was reluctant. "Yes."

"In a parish as isolated and relatively backward as this, is it customary to perform autopsies in routine deaths?"

His eyes flicked momentarily to Amantha and then back again. "No. However your uncle left instructions that there should be an autopsy when he died."

"And the result of that autopsy?"

"A *natural* death," Watson said firmly. "Absolutely natural. The coroner—an excellent *medical* man—is positive."

I glanced at Amantha. Yes, a hidden smile.

Freddie, Orville, and I are tenuously related and find a common unity only back to Uncle Benthany. We are not brothers, nor even first cousins, and only Orville actually bears the Crawford name.

His lank hair is thinning and he is the president of a New Orleans firm which specializes in collecting bad debts. He finds sharp-toothed enjoyment in his work and during his apprentice days he was bitten by dogs a number of times.

Freddie Meridith wears sports jackets and bow ties and he is an instructor in art at a small college for girls. Few people know that both of his wives were accidentally electrocuted in their bathtubs.

I have recently reached the age of forty, though new acquaintances assume that I am older. My manner, perhaps. I have a small inheritance from my father and this eliminates the necessity for labor and allows leisure for the development of intelligence. I admit to a certain egotism, but it is only the result of objective comparison. When I look beyond the moon, I am most dissatisfied.

Orville polished his shell-rimmed glasses. "I don't see how I can get away from the firm for a year."

Freddie paralleled with his objection. "How could I possibly get a year's leave? I'd probably be dismissed first. Besides, one of my students seems most receptive to" He sighed.

But these were routine gestures of protest and I did not bother to complete the trilogy. For a third share of three million dollars, one can put aside business, one's latest potential wife, or even one's freedom.

I spoke to Amantha. "Edgerton and I will take the second floor suite in the east wing."

When she left to make the arrangements, Freddie turned indignantly to Watson. "Why would Uncle Benthany put *her* in his will? After all, she's been here only four months. You don't suppose that he and she were . . . ?"

"I don't know," Watson said.

And I did not think so. Uncle Benthany, from what I knew of him, was quite capable of any conduct. But I had the feeling that Amantha would not be a party to such an arrangement.

"Just who is Amantha Desfountaines?" Orville demanded.

Watson put his papers back into the manila envelope. He wound the string. He stared at his handiwork. Finally he cleared his throat. "She is a paroled murderer."

Watson went on to explain. "It seems that Mrs. Desfountaines—she chooses to retain the name of the husband she murdered—was married at the age of seventeen. Mr. Desfountaines was considerably older than she . . . in his fifties, I believe. He died three months after the marriage. His relatives insisted upon an autopsy and it was discovered that he had been poisoned. Under questioning, Mrs. Desfountaines admitted administering the lethal dose." Watson picked up his hat. "She spent fourteen years in prison and was paroled eight months ago."

Orville was incredulous. "Uncle Benthany *hired* her? Didn't he know what she was?"

"Well . . . yes. As a matter of fact, I have the feeling that he . . . ah . . . searched for someone like her. So to speak."

I congratulated Uncle Benthany and his active little mind. Wherever he was—and if he were acclimated—he was undoubtedly chuckling.

Uncle Benthany detested us, for perhaps no more reason than that he was rich enough and malevolent enough to detest everybody. He could, had he been so inclined, have left his money to charities—if he were aware that they existed. But such wills are made to be broken, and so it appeared to me that Uncle Benthany had bowed to the inevitable—but chosen to season it.

Freddie was pale. "Do you mean to say that we've got to . . . to *eat* here? With *that* woman *cooking* for us?"

Watson spoke soothingly. "Mrs. Desfountaines does not do the actual cooking. There are servants for *that*. She merely superintends and directs the running of the household. However, if there should be any . . . untoward . . . circumstances, I shall, of course, insist upon an autopsy."

"I shall fire her immediately," Orville announced firmly.

Watson smiled. "But you can't. The will stipulates that she must remain here as housekeeper for a full year or all of you will be disinherited."

When he left, I went upstairs to my suite. Amantha was directing two maids in the last minute tidying of my rooms.

I spoke to her. "I would like to mention that I prefer to have breakfast in my rooms. Edgerton will be down each morning to fetch it."

"I can have it sent up."

"Thank you, but only Edgerton knows how to prepare coffee to my taste and he will be down anyway."

We studied each other quite openly.

She smiled faintly. "Is Edgerton your food taster?"

For my own reference, it was difficult to describe her. Handsome was too little. Beautiful too much. She seemed a creature of the mind as well as the body. A rather rare combination.

"Except for the preparation of the coffee," I said, "I shall leave breakfast to your discretion—with the following reservations. If there is bacon or ham, I prefer tomato juice. Otherwise orange juice will do nicely. Under no circumstances will I endure fish for the first meal of the day."

At dinner that evening, I was about to elevate the first spoonful of chicken gumbo to my lips, when Orville stopped me.

"Just one moment, Charles," he said.

"Yes?" I noticed that neither Orville nor Freddie appeared to have any intention of eating.

Orville waved a hand over the table. "How can we tell that all this is . . . *safe*?"

I regarded a portion of okra in my spoon. "I hardly think that Amantha would poison us the first evening."

Orville was not as optimistic. "I don't know. I have the strong suspicion that most murderesses are a bit irrational. Freddie and I have been talking this over and we've come up with something. A safety measure."

At that moment Amantha entered the room and surveyed the table arrangements. "I trust that everything is satisfactory?"

Orville smiled. "We were just about to send for you. We have something important to discuss."

"Yes?"

Orville selected his words. "Mrs. Desfontaines, don't you think that one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in the hand is worth poison in the bush?"

"What Orville means," Freddie said, "is why don't each one of us—Orville, Charles, and me—just give you fifty thousand dollars at the end of the year?"

Orville rubbed his hands. "After all, you've been a loyal and faithful

housekeeper to Uncle Benthaney for . . . ah . . . four *whole* months and we feel that you should receive some small token of our gratitude."

Amantha smiled faintly.

Orville went on. "Let us face the facts, Mrs. Desfountaines. If all . . . or only *one* of us . . . survives the year, you will receive nothing from Uncle Benthaney's estate. Not one penny. We don't believe that is fair."

Amantha's eyes were laughing.

Orville nodded earnestly. "The one hundred and fifty thousand dollars is yours. In the clear. No strings attached."

"With all that money waiting for you," Freddie said happily, "you won't be tempted to . . . risk the electric chair? . . . by doing something rash."

Amantha smiled. "Mr. Crawford, you will give me fifty thousand dollars?"

"You may count on it," Orville said.

She turned to Freddie. "And you?"

"Certainly. I don't want to be poisoned either."

And then she looked at me.

"No," I said. "And now if there are no objections, I shall eat."

Freddie frowned. "Very well, Charles. You may take your chances. But don't expect sympathy from me or Orville when you lie gasping and writhing on the rug."

Amantha was about to leave.

"One moment," Orville said. He indicated the table. "You don't want to . . . ah . . . take anything back to the kitchen, do you? I mean, perhaps there is something in the . . . the *salad*? . . . that might disagree with us?"

"Everything is quite safe, sir."

A grain of inspiration rattled in Freddie's head. "Why don't you just eat *with* us, Mrs. Desfountaines? Every meal. Eat *everything* we do. We're not snobbish, are we, Charles?"

Amantha's lips twitched. "Do you have any objections, Mr. Wicker?"

"None," I said. "Please join us."

And thereafter Amantha dined with us.

During the next week, Orville, Freddie and I had our possessions transferred to the house. We settled in our respective suites and prepared to pass the year, each in his own fashion.

On a rainy evening a month later, Freddie roused himself from hori-

zontal meditation on the couch. "Did you know that this region is just rampant with Voodoo?"

Orville snorted. "An educated man does not believe in such nonsense." Then he bristled under my mild stare. "I have a B.A. in Accounting," he said for my benefit.

Freddie maneuvered to a sitting position. "If an *ouanga* points a finger at you, you will die by sunset." He pointed in the general direction of Orville.

Orville stirred uneasily. "It just occurred to me that perhaps Amantha is not the only one I . . . we . . . have to worry about."

Freddie contemplated his forefinger. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that one of us possibly won't be satisfied with his share of the estate."

Freddie did not look up. "I am perfectly happy with one million dollars."

Orville regarded him pointedly. "Murder can get to be a habit."

Freddie smiled. "They were both accidents. The poor dears loved to listen to music while they bathed and their radios fell into the tub." He sighed. "They *lied* to me. Left me nothing. Absolutely nothing."

Late the next afternoon, Orville entered the living room pale and breathing heavily. He went to the liquor cabinet and trembled Scotch into a glass. After a bracing swallow, he turned to Freddie and me. "She pointed a finger at me."

I glanced over the top of my magazine. "Who? Amantha?"

"No. An old, old woman. I was taking a walk around the grounds when I saw her under the willows near the pond. She didn't say a word. Just glared at me and pointed. I think she was one of those wretched *ouangas*."

Freddie eyed the mantel clock. "It's about an hour before sunset. Do you have any last words?"

"Did you speak to her?" I asked.

Orville shook his head. "Good heavens, no! I just ran . . . walked away."

"It's quite painless," Freddie said. "An easy way to go."

"Orville," I said. "As anyone cognizant of Voodoo and the like would know, what can be done, can be undone. She probably pointed at you for a solid reason. Ten dollars, I imagine. Why not offer her twenty to remove the curse and perhaps another twenty to tell you who gave her the idea?"

Orville grasped at that. "Do you think it would work?"

"Certainly. How do you suppose Voodoo practitioners earn the major portion of their incomes?"

Orville put down his glass. "Anyone *that* old can't walk very fast. I'll find her."

A half an hour after sunset, Orville returned. His shoes and trouser legs were muddy and his face was a mixture of green and white. "I couldn't find her anywhere." His eyes darted about wildly. "I'm doomed."

"Orville," I said patiently. "At this moment you are alive, are you not?" He agreed.

"And it *is* after sunset, is it not?"

Orville blinked and put two and two together. "By George, that's right. It *is* after sunset and I'm still alive." He wiped the perspiration from his face and glasses and regarded us smugly. "I *told* you that an educated man is impervious to Voodoo."

I retired to my room that evening at ten and took with me a library volume of Tennyson. I hadn't read him since the days when I was sixteen and inclined to dream.

At ten after eleven, something brought me back from the world of white castles and maidens fair.

It was not quite a scream. It was something hoarse and urgent and it seemed to come from outside my open window.

I put the book aside. A gibbous moon behind a feathering of clouds provided sufficient illumination to whiten the lawn to the edge of the woods, but I saw nothing.

I looked directly beneath my second floor window. A rectangle of light from the window below lay on the shadows of the building. Orville's room.

I stared at the lawn and the woods again. Had it been some animal?

Finally I shrugged and dismissed the matter. But I remained at the window. It was a beautiful evening and orange-blossom-scented breezes whispered in the night.

My attention was drawn again to the square of light below me. A silhouette, but not that of Orville. And then her arms raised and she pulled the curtains.

I went back to my chair and threw Tennyson into the wastebasket. I fetched a bottle from a cupboard. Samuel Johnson had said never to drink

unless one were happy. Sam Johnson was an idiot.

The clock ticked away and I sat with my second glass and my imagination, when I heard the faint, muffled report. A gunshot? Had it come from below me, or this floor?

I frowned. In this wing, I was the only occupant of the second floor, except for Edgerton. Under me, Orville had his rooms. And to the rear . . . Amantha.

I went to Edgerton's door and listened. He was obviously asleep and in good nasal health.

Downstairs I rapped lightly at Orville's door and waited half a minute. I rapped again and then turned the knob.

Orville lay on the rug before his bed, his face turned toward the door. A pistol lay a few inches from his right hand.

I bent down on one knee beside him. He was quite dead. He had been shot through the heart, but there was remarkably little blood.

I rose and telephoned the police.

A Sergeant Pouchet arrived with the uniformed police and eventually various medical officials and technicians joined him. We were questioned until the early hours of morning before we were given some respite.

Pouchet returned at noon, obviously in need of sleep, but determined to go over our statements again.

"Mr. Wicker," he said. "According to your statement, you heard the shot and then went downstairs?"

I nodded.

"Did you notice anything else . . . or hear anything at all before the shot was fired?"

"No," I said. "Nothing at all. Absolutely nothing."

He turned to Amantha. "And you claim that you *didn't* hear the shot? Your room is on the same floor as Mr. Crawford's, isn't it?"

She was pale. "I was asleep. I heard nothing."

"My window was open," I said. "And I was awake."

Freddie interrupted. "Is there going to be an autopsy?"

"We've removed the bullet," Pouchet said. "It matches the gun found at his side." His eyes went over us. "From appearances, one would assume that he committed suicide."

Freddie sniffed. "Is that what *you* think?"

Pouchet smiled faintly. "Now why would a man who's about to inherit a million dollars commit suicide?"

I offered a motive. "Perhaps Orville was in ill health?"

Pouchet shook his head. "We've been in touch with his doctor. Orville Crawford was in excellent physical condition. He had a complete physical examination a month ago."

"He might have been depressed," I said. "Or frightened. After all, an *ouanga* pointed at him last night. When a man fears death, he often tries to meet that fear by killing himself."

"We traced the *ouanga*," Pouchet said. "Auntie Beljame. She's the only one around here who still turns a hand to Voodoo. Auntie's on Social Security, but she needs tobacco money now and then."

"Who paid her?" I asked.

"She doesn't know. She got an unsigned typewritten note and twenty dollars in the mail. The note described the man she was supposed to point out and gave his name." He regarded me thoughtfully. "But Auntie Beljame can't see very well any more. And she waited out there for two hours. The damp seeped into her bones and her temper got short. Finally she just waited until *anybody* came out of the house and pointed at him. Then she went home."

Pouchet smiled again. "She pointed at the wrong man. She was supposed to point at you, Mr. Wicker."

That evening I received the first rubber doll—the one with the pin thrust through its head.

At breakfast in my rooms the next morning, I sat down and sighed.

"What is it, sir?" Edgerton asked.

"My foot," I said. "I have the most peculiar pain just at the ankle joint of my right foot."

"May I suggest liniment?" He lingered after pouring the cream. "Sir, if you were to receive this million dollars . . . this million and a half, now . . . would you change your style of living?"

"Not to any important degree."

"Then you don't actually *need* the money, do you, sir?"

"I suppose not. But nevertheless one gets a certain feeling of warmth to know that one has it."

After I finished breakfast, Edgerton returned for the tray.

"Edgerton," I said. "The coffee was bitter."

He paled. "You *drank* it, sir?"

"Of course I drank it."

"But, sir, suppose it was *poisoned*?"

"Nonsense," I said, but I was a trifle uneasy. "You *did* make the coffee this morning, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir." He thought about the coffee for a moment and then his face cleared. "Now I remember. I'm afraid that I let it percolate much too long. The cook and I became involved in a discussion."

"What possible discussion could make you neglect my coffee?"

"We were talking about Voodoo, sir. The cook believes in it quite implicitly."

"That is undoubtedly the reason why she is a cook and not an empress."

Edgerton went to the hall door with the tray and I opened it for him.

An oblong package swung pendulum-like from the outside doorknob. Edgerton frowned. "What is it, sir?"

I removed the package and broke the string around the cardboard box. In another moment I was gazing at a rubber doll with a pin thrust through its right foot.

Edgerton's eyes went from the doll to my foot.

"Just a twinge of pain now and then," I said sharply. "Nothing more." I regarded the doll belligerently. "This is all nonsense."

"Sir, it is *not* nonsense. Do you really believe that Mr. Crawford committed suicide?"

I said nothing.

"Forgive me for saying so," Edgerton said. "But you are an idiot."

"Edgerton!"

He was embarrassed, but determined. "Is it not idiocy to risk your life in this house . . . with a murderer, or murdereress . . . merely to inherit a million and a half dollars which you don't really need?"

"Edgerton, there are times when I am unashamedly stubborn. I would rather be removed from here in a wicker basket than succumb to threats."

In the early afternoon I took a walk about the grounds. Near the junction of the driveway and the gravel country road, I left the path to study a group of ferns.

My attention was drawn back to the driveway when Freddie appeared and made his way to the roadside Crawford mailbox. He inserted an envelope into the metal container and raised the red flag. Then he glanced about—rather furtively, I thought—but he did not see me.

He walked back up the winding driveway and disappeared.

Two minutes later my reverie on the primordial nature of ferns was again interrupted—this time when Edgerton slunk out of the woods and

made his way to the mailbox.

He quickly removed Freddie's envelope and began working a penknife under the flap.

I stepped from my concealment. "Edgerton, what *are* you doing?"

He dropped the envelope and seemed about to bolt, but then he recognized me. "Oh, it's *you*, sir."

I retrieved the envelope from the ground. "Explain yourself, Edgerton."

He licked his lips. "Well . . . sir . . . I thought that if Mr. Meridith was the individual who has been sending you those dolls, perhaps I could actually catch him . . . in the act, so to speak . . . of communicating with his Voodoo practitioner. Or even ordering another supply of rubber dolls."

I glanced at the envelope. It was addressed to Sergeant Pouchet. "Do you suspect that Sergeant Pouchet is Freddie's curse maker?"

Edgerton was, of course, uneasy. "I've often heard it said that beneath the thin veneer of civilization there lurks the dark monster of the jungle—or something to that effect. I do not see why policemen are considered exempt."

The envelope flap was open and I pulled out the single folded sheet of paper. The note was typewritten and unsigned.

Removing the bullet is not enough. Why don't you do a complete autopsy?

Edgerton had been reading over my shoulder. "What does Mr. Meridith mean by that?"

I put the sheet of paper and the envelope into my pocket.

Edgerton was a bit shocked. "Aren't you going to mail it, sir?"

"No."

Sergeant Pouchet questioned us again that day and the next. It was obvious that he suspected that Orville had been murdered, but proving that interesting point was another matter.

It was on another pre-evening walk that I came upon Amantha. I fell into step with her as we walked back to the house and after a few desultory words I found myself saying, "I've been told that you spent some time in prison?"

It was a blunt question—but typical of me, I'm afraid—and for a mo-

ment I thought that she would not honor it with an answer.

She stared at the dripping willows we passed and then spoke. "Yes. I confessed to murdering my husband."

"Why?"

She looked at me coldly. "For his money, of course."

I smiled. "I didn't mean that. I meant why did you *confess*? It strikes me that you are quite capable of intelligent murder. You would surely not be caught, but even if you were, you certainly would not volunteer a confession."

She turned up the collar of her coat. "It's getting quite chilly."

I was not swerved. "To satisfy my unwarranted curiosity, *did* you poison your husband?"

"I told you quite plainly that I confessed."

"My dear Amantha, you are aware that I made a definite distinction. You *confessed* to the murder. Now I am merely asking if there was any validity to the confession?"

She did not speak again until we reached the rear door of the house. "If I were to tell you that I did *not* poison my husband, would that enable you to drink your orange juice with greater ease of mind?"

"It is more important than that."

Her eyes suddenly glittered. "I have spent fourteen shining years in prison. Do you not think that now life owes me a murder? Or two? Or three?" And then she smiled and her teeth were white in the darkness. "And I am intelligent enough to make a success of the project, am I not?"

The next morning as I rose from the breakfast table, I winced.

"Sir?" Edgerton inquired solicitously.

"I have the strangest pain in my patella."

"Sir?"

"Patella," I said. "A sort of burning sensation."

He gathered the dishes and put them on the tray. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"No. It's probably nothing." I lit a cigar. "I believe I'll take a stroll in the garden."

I went downstairs, but instead of going outside, I turned into the library. It was empty and I found a chair in a relatively dark corner and waited.

Five minutes passed and then Edgerton entered the room and went

directly to the dictionary stand. Hesitantly he began paging through the large volume.

"Patella," I said, and then spelled it. "P-a-t-e-l-l-a."

Edgerton froze.

I rose and walked toward him. "Patella. The kneepan. And while we are at it, I might also mention that it does *not* pain me one bit nor has it ever."

I'm afraid I showed my teeth. "Edgerton, it suddenly struck me that actually I had been receiving those blasted dolls after the fact—if we may use that expression. When I complained about a headache . . . *voila!* . . . ten minutes later there was a doll on my doorknob, its head impaled by a pin."

He could not meet my eyes.

"Upon mulling over this and after the receipt of the second doll, I preferred to think that perhaps there was a hidden microphone about my rooms. Whenever I vocalized some physical ailment, someone monitoring my words scuttled from his listening post and immediately stabbed and delivered a doll. But now I see that it was *you*, Edgerton."

He hung his head. "Yes, sir."

"And you were also responsible for the *ouanga*?"

"I'm afraid so, sir."

"Edgerton," I demanded. "What have you to say for yourself?"

He finally met my eyes. "Sir, I feared for your life. You are aware that we have one murderess and a possible murderer on the premises?"

"Go on."

He waved a hand helplessly. "Sir, you admit that you do not *need* the inheritance, and yet you foolishly insist upon staying here. I do not believe that you can survive the year without someone murdering you." He sighed. "I realized that it was impossible to frighten you away to safety either by persuasion or reason. Therefore I resorted to the supernatural in the hopes of accomplishing that end."

"In the realm of the supernatural, I am fearless."

"I realize that now, sir, but it was my only hope."

Edgerton looked quite contrite, and so I finally modified my glare. "Very well, your motive was commendable, but henceforth cease and desist."

"But you *are* in danger, sir."

"I am perfectly capable of looking after myself."

His face brightened with a sudden thought. "Sir, it just came to me that perhaps *you* might be the murderer."

"Edgerton!"

But he was attracted by the idea. "If you *are*, sir, you may certainly let me share your secret. I will keep the strictest confidence and it will set my mind at ease. Obviously if you are the murderer, it seems unlikely that you will murder yourself. I need worry no longer. Did you shoot Mr. Crawford, sir?"

"Edgerton, that will be all."

In the evening I found Amantha alone in the living room. I sat down near her to read, but almost immediately put my book aside. "Amantha," I said quietly, "I know that you were in Orville's room a little while before he was shot."

She studied me with those dark eyes. "Why didn't you tell that to Sergeant Pouchet?"

"I didn't think that it was . . . necessary."

She seemed slightly puzzled as she watched me.

"Amantha," I said. "Did you shoot Orville?"

After a moment she spoke. "Yes."

I experienced a frustrating anger. "You didn't have to *tell* me."

"But you asked."

"I know, but still. . . ."

"Does that put you in an awkward position? Will you have to tell Sergeant Pouchet?"

"Damn Sergeant Pouchet." I found it necessary to pace the room. "Amantha, it is entirely unnecessary for you to go about exterminating people. Especially for money. Eventually you can have all my . . . I mean, if you really want. . . ." I found myself unable to go on.

She smiled faintly. "But you won't even give me a paltry fifty thousand dollars just to insure that I do not poison you."

I waved a hand. "Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute. I mean that . . . if *you* really wanted to poison me, you are perfectly free. . ." My collar felt tight. "I would rather be poisoned by you than by anybody I know. . . ." I happened to glance at a mirror. My face was beet red. A schoolboy, I thought savagely. "Anyway," I went on lamely. "You didn't have to kill Orville."

"But I didn't. I merely shot him."

I waited to have that explained.

"I'd just finished locking up the house for the night," Amantha said, "and was going to my room, when I found Orville Crawford lying in the hall—half in and half out of his room, as though he had been trying to summon help when he collapsed and died. I was about to call for aid, but then . . ." She hesitated.

"Yes?"

Amantha closed her eyes for a second or two. "Inside the room a glass lay on the floor. There was a decanter of whiskey on the table and when I smelled it . . ."

She appealed to me. "Don't you understand? He had been *poisoned* . . . and there was a *poisoner* . . . a *murderess* . . . in the house. I would have been the one most obviously suspected and . . ." Pain crept into her eyes. "Fourteen years in prison. I just couldn't face anything like that again. I pulled Mr. Crawford back into his room. Then I drew the drapes and removed the decanter and glass from the room."

She took a deep breath before she went on. "I went to the gun rack in the billiard room and returned to Mr. Crawford's room with a revolver. I put it into his hand . . . and held it to his heart . . . and pressed the trigger."

I nodded slowly. "Yes. It would seem as though he had died of a gunshot wound. There would be no need for a complete autopsy. The bullet would be removed and that would be that."

She looked up. "Are you going to tell Sergeant Pouchet?"

"I see no need to tell him anything at all." I sat down beside her. "There is something else I would like to know. If you did not poison your husband, why did you take the blame?"

She looked away and when she spoke her voice was tired. "My father was about to lose everything. He was immersed in debt. It was he who engineered the marriage . . . the arrangement. He hoped that my husband would lend him the money he needed."

"But your husband refused?"

"My husband laughed at him. He said that he'd known all along why I'd married him and that now the . . . the joke was on us."

Her hands trembled. "The poisoning was clumsily done . . . and my father would have gone to prison . . ."

I was incredulous. "Your father poisoned your husband and *you* took the blame? What kind of a father would let . . ."

She flushed faintly. "He said that he had less than a year to live . . . and

that he'd rather shoot himself than go to prison. He begged. . ." Her fingers clenched her handkerchief. "He said that if I would take the blame it would mean only a year in prison. When he died there would be a letter that would clear me."

"But when he died there was no letter?"

She turned on me almost fiercely. "He did *not* die. He is alive today. I found out that he had *never* been ill at all." Tears sprang into her eyes. "After the first few years, he did not even bother to write to me."

A lonely child, a lonely girl, a lonely woman. I touched her temples gently with my fingers.

Edgerton entered the room. "Will there be anything else this evening, sir?"

I rose. "Edgerton, Mrs. Desfontaines did not murder Orville."

His eyes went to her and then back to me. "I'm happy, sir."

"And, Edgerton, I did not murder Orville either."

"I am happy for *both* of you, sir."

He was about to leave.

"Edgerton."

"Yes, sir?"

"The thought comes to me that *you* might have murdered Orville."

He raised an eyebrow. "Me, sir?"

"Yes, *you*. In my interests, of course. You are loyal. You may have chosen to protect me by eliminating those who threaten me."

"No, sir," Edgerton said. "I did not kill Mr. Crawford. I did not even think of it at the time."

I rubbed my ear thoughtfully. "Since none of the three of us murdered Orville, that leaves only one other person."

"Yes, sir," Edgerton said.

I resumed pacing until I came to a decision. "Very well, I must kill Freddie."

"Sir. . ." Edgerton said.

I held up a hand. "I cannot be dissuaded. I am resolved. Both of you will, of course, keep this confidential?"

"Sir. . ." Edgerton said.

I shook my head. "I am not thinking of my own safety. But I realize that if I should die, Freddie will certainly be tempted to remove Amantha. He will probably feel himself threatened by her presence and reputation. I cannot have that."

“Charles,” Amantha said. “I think I should be the one to deal with Mr. Meridith. I can’t have you risking prison.”

“Sir and Madam. . .” Edgerton said.

At that moment a second-floor scream skipped down the stairs.

I blinked. “That’s Freddie! I recognize the timbre.”

“Yes, sir,” Edgerton said. “I’m afraid that his radio’s fallen into his bathtub. The poor man has been electrocuted.”

My eyes narrowed. “We are on the first floor and Freddie is on the second. How do you *know* that’s what happened?”

Edgerton’s face was bland. “Just a guess, sir. But I do know that the radio sits on a rickety shelf just above his bathtub. It *appears* solid, but the slightest . . . ah . . . bump upon the wall, and it will tumble into the tub.”

I appraised Edgerton, but he did not lose his beatific innocence.

What in the world was I going to do with three million dollars? I sighed. Perhaps the three of us would think of something.



Give Me Ten Days

by Theodore Pratt

It was crazy. It was unreasonable. It wasn't the way he did things. But the minute he saw her picture in the newspaper, Brad was in love with her.

He spread the paper out and looked at her. Young, pointed face. Two dark little eyes that stared at him and liked him. One mouth that smiled, as if it ought not place such lovely contours on public exhibition. Three or four waves of saffron hair. Half an ear.

Brad read what she said to him in the advertisement. "Give me ten days." She asked him that in large letters. "And I'll make you a dancer any partner will be proud of." She promised him that in smaller type. She even signed her name to show she meant it—Mávis Ward, in firm, feminine letters.

That's what happened when you looked for one thing too hard. You found another. For three months, on his first solo job as a Federal Special Investigator, he had been hunting down one Josa Sforzi. Gentleman of indeterminate Balkan ancestry. Known to be light-fingered in a large way. Nothing definite on him. Just extraneous cargo in a country that had too many criminals of its own. Suspected of being an alien illegally entered upon these shores.

The trouble was that Brad hadn't found him. It brought lines to his lean forehead. It took weight off his rangy body. It put an angry haze in his steel grey eyes. It made him try so furiously that his chances of success were cut down, nearly destroyed, by the very intensity of his endeavor. It put him in the position of needing relaxation so much that he fell in love with a picture of a girl.

In place of the dreary months of no Sforzi, there loomed, so strongly that they couldn't be denied, ten days with Mavis. He'd forget about Sforzi that long, then begin on him afresh.

"Haywire," he muttered to himself, when he thought over the idea of

falling for a photograph. "But maybe this's what I need." He also reflected that he had been looking for Mavis much longer than he had been looking for Sforzi.

When he saw her at the school of dancing that evening he decided, without any hesitation at all, that he would give her ten years. For a starter. He recognized her at once; there wasn't any question about it at all when he picked her out and took in the slim perfection of her figure—that hadn't been in the picture, but which he had been sure went with her.

She was dancing with a tall man clad faultlessly. Brad stopped looking at her for a minute and looked at the man. His heart gave a resounding thump in his chest, startling him, for he didn't often allow that to happen. Could it be? Could it possibly be? He stared some more. He saw an ambitious nose. An eagle eye. A mole decorating one temple.

Then he knew that while looking for another thing, he had found the first thing.

Instantly he was on guard. He wasn't going haywire now. At least not so much. But there was still Mavis. It didn't change her, except for the unenviable possibility that she might have some connection with Sforzi. Still, she *couldn't* be a part of him.

He watched them. They moved smoothly over the shining floor. Sforzi didn't look as if he needed any instruction. He knew all the steps. He spoke to Mavis as they glided. Their glances met as if they enjoyed each other. It was almost enough to make Brad clamp down on the man at once, instead of waiting to see what he was working and get him more surely that way.

A shellacked blonde sitting at a varnished desk informed Brad that an instructress would be assigned to him.

"I want Mavis," Brad told her.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I mean, Miss Ward."

"She's busy at the moment. There are other—"

"I'll wait."

"It will be at least half an hour. All our teachers are—"

"I'll wait."

He waited a while and then told the shellacked blonde he believed he knew the gentleman dancing with Miss Ward. "Mr. Josa Sforzi, isn't it? The importer of Fifty-seventh Street?" he concocted.

"That's Mr. Gleb Farodny. He stays at the Mirazon, I believe."

"My mistake," said Brad.

When Sforzi relinquished his monopoly on Mavis, Brad was undecided whether or not there was more between them than dancing lessons. He certainly wondered if it was the usual thing for a pupil, upon leaving, to bend low and kiss the hand of his teacher.

He took the hand that had been kissed and something passed into him. It was like the moment when he broke a case after weeks of hard work. It was like coming into a fortune. It was like sunrise on a new day. The two dark little eyes looked at him and still liked him. The mouth smiled modestly with its revelations. The saffron hair and the half of an ear were right under his chin.

It was exactly as advertised, only a lot better.

They moved off together over the floor. She let him lead her, a feather in his arms, her feet plucking at the air. This first moment was to analyze his dancing, to study his faults, to see if he lacked confidence.

He established one of the answers at once. "Bradford Murray. That's his whole name."

"You can't have danced much for some time, Mr. Murray," she said. "Your style is that of about two years ago."

"Brad—that's what they call him for short—hasn't had much time to join the rhythmic crowd."

"You lack variation," she told him competently. "Variation is what makes an interesting dancer."

"Did I tell you he's twenty-eight, single, and curious in a big city?"

"You hold yourself a little too stiffly. Relax. Take it easy."

"He saw your picture in the paper and fell in love with you. No, he doesn't mean what you naturally think. Not the ten days kind. Not the ten weeks kind."

"You've never learned to turn left properly, have you, Mr. Murray?"

"The ten million years kind."

"Come, we'll try a proper left turn. That's better. Now, again."

"The kind of love when two people are born and grow up and meet and know right away they're made for each other."

She stopped then. "Mr. Murray," she said, "are we going to teach you modern dancing, or are you going to continue talking nonsense?"

"Listen," he said, "I mean what I'm saying. A lot more than you think. I'm clipping that picture out of the newspaper today and putting it in the

bank. I want to save it. I want to draw interest on it, for the rest of my life."

"Maybe the bank isn't open for business."

"This bank," he said, "is so nice that it always listens to what the right kind of depositor has to say."

"Shall we dance?"

They moved off again. "The way we'll arrange my ten days," he told her, "is that you have half the time every day to make me a partner any dancer will be proud of, and I have the other half to make you proud of Brad."

The Mirazon was mid-town and the smartest thing in deluxe hostelry. It was new and great and lifted itself toward the sky without hesitation, as though it wasn't afraid of anything. Not a place where you lived without an income to be respected, visible or invisible. That of Mr. Gleb Farodny wasn't in sight, but he had a suite there. An expensive set of rooms, high up in the tower. Brad didn't get up there. He didn't particularly want to. He picked up Sforzi every day when he emerged from the lobby. Sometimes in the morning. More often in the afternoon. Hit his tail and stuck with him on every little activity.

Sforzi did nothing any man-about-town might not do. He paid visits to his tailor. He lunched on Park Avenue. He dropped into plays. He showed a taste for foreign movies. He dined alone at the Mirazon. Once he played bridge with friends. Nothing he did was unusual.

If he had something on the grill, he was laying low about it. The most significant part of his life appeared to be killing time until he went, each evening at eight, for his hour of dancing instruction from Mavis that wasn't instruction. She didn't teach him anything. They spent the hour going through steps he already knew. And talking.

During Brad's own hour, Mavis made more progress with him than he with her. They worked on the left turn. It was still hard for him. She kept him at it. While he told her all about Brad. All except who he actually was. He had to keep that even from her. Just in case. He felt he was holding back on her, deceiving her.

She listened to what he did say. A couple of times he thought he touched her. But he couldn't know for sure. She only smiled, not as much as in the picture, and said it was a short step after those two long ones.

He asked her to go out with him.

"The regulations," she told him coolly, "forbid us to make outside engagements with the pupils."

He wanted to know where she lived. He could call for her there. Nobody would know about the regulations.

She was sorry. She wanted to keep her job. She wanted to keep it so much that she wouldn't tell him where she lived.

That difficulty wasn't great. All he had to do was to pick her up when she came out of the school of dancing and tail her home. He could excuse himself on the grounds that it was in the line of duty, that maybe she was connected with Sforzi. But he couldn't do it. It wouldn't do any good, anyway, if she didn't want to see him outside her job. It made him sore. It made him think more of her, want her more than ever.

On the fifth day, what he hoped wasn't going to happen did happen. Like a leech he had stayed with Sforzi from early morning. In the middle of the afternoon, Sforzi landed at a small apartment house on Sixty-first Street. He went in as if he knew the place. He stayed three hours and twenty minutes. Until it was dark. When he came out Brad saw Mavis' face at his side. He saw her look up at Sforzi and laugh. She had never laughed with him like that.

They got in a taxi and Brad heard the name of a restaurant. He let it go at that.

That evening Mavis looked at him when he didn't tell her any more about Brad. She seemed to expect the regular eulogy. When it failed to come, she didn't say anything. She appeared a little triumphant, as if she had won. He was on the point of broaching the subject of Sforzi, of asking her if she knew what she was doing. He didn't. He couldn't yet altogether accept it. He called himself a fool. Because it was there. It stared at him. The probability that she knew what she was doing, in fact, thumbed its nose at him.

The sixth day, at noon, he stood in a dim bar with his back to them while they sat at a table at the other side of the room. He could make out the shadowy sides of their faces in the mirror of the bar, hers partially hidden behind her wide hat, Sforzi's complete profile.

Sforzi was talking. He was telling her something and she was listening. Intently. She nodded, as if repeating instructions. Sforzi took out paper and pencil and drew things, many things, and showed them to her, illustrating. When their waiter appeared with food he turned the paper

over. When the waiter went away he turned the paper back again, explained some more.

It went on during their entire luncheon. She wanted to know something. He told her. She asked another question. Voluble assurance came from Sforzi. She argued. Objected to something. Veheimently. More assurance, heated this time, issued from Sforzi. She shook her head, not entirely convinced. But she accepted what he'd said. As if she had to.

Brad chose Mavis that afternoon, his taxi following hers, to a glittering black and gold jeweler's on Fifth Avenue. He examined watches at the front of the great store and let her hat hide him from her while a gleaming array of pendants and necklaces was spread before her at a special table far back in the place. She asked for more things, until a rich pile was in front of her. She seemed doubtful about her choice. Like any woman not able to make up her mind without vacillation and long study. As if she would decide later.

Brad let her go when she departed from the store. He had what he wanted. It was also what he didn't want.

The seventh day there was only one thing he had to establish. At another restaurant he tried it out while Sforzi was engaged in grave conference with the head waiter. While his head was turned away, Brad planted himself in full view of Mavis. He nodded, half-smiled, moved his lips in a soundless but accusing greeting.

It was established when she looked up and recognized him. She flushed, seemed disturbed. Then she asserted herself. Her acknowledgement of his greeting had in it the right to do as she pleased, the fact that he had no call on her, that outside an hour every evening for ten days she was no business of his.

That evening, at the school, he murmured, as they danced together, "The regulations forbid us to make outside engagement with the pupils."

He could feel the chill that went through her. "I met Mr. Farodny before he came here," she told him coldly. "He's been very nice to me. He likes dancing. I like to go out with him occasionally. That's all."

Her instruction that evening was more impersonal than ever. It was downright frigid. She was exasperated when he couldn't get the left turn. It got to Brad, hurt him. He wanted to save her, keep a little, anyway, of what she had first meant to him. At the end of his hour he told her, "Mavis, don't do it."

"Do what?"

"It won't work," he said. "Not twelve hours after it's pulled."

"I don't know what you're talking about." When she looked at him, her expression of mystification had every indication of being genuine. She was not only a good dancing teacher, Brad decided, but an excellent actress as well.

He became more specific. "Sforzi."

"Sforzi?" Did she let a flicker of fear show in the two dark little eyes?

"Farodny. Whatever you want to call him."

"Oh," she said. She was ready to admit, then, that he was talking about his rival, trying to run him down. She stared at him angrily. A cute attitude to take. Covered up admission of anything else. "I was beginning to like Brad, that friend of yours," she said. "But I don't like him at all now." She turned away. Abruptly.

During the next two days, Brad didn't do anything about the whole thing. He figured that certainly his warning would be enough to take them off the Fifth Avenue project. He had done that much for her, anyway, even though she probably wasn't thanking him. He meant to do more. He'd give her the full ten days. He had to have them for himself, as a man clings to something he has already lost. Then, after they were over, he would take Sforzi away from her. If he could. If the illegal entry charge would stand up.

Tight-lipped, much too courteous, he let her polish him off as a dancer. He learned the latest steps. Holding her in his arms, he went through them. It wasn't any fun. Not what it had been at first. Not when she was what she was. But she did a good job. She was all business. Sforzi, who had the first hour, looked at Brad a couple of times while he waited for Mavis to get through with him. Sforzi seemed amused.

The tenth evening he received a shock. He arrived in the foyer of the dancing school just in time to witness Mavis being led into the manager's office by three men, with a properly indignant Sforzi trailing along. Brad recognized two of the men for what they were. Plainclothesmen. The third he didn't place instantly. Then he guessed. From the Fifth Avenue jewelry store.

Brad swore, at himself for not having succeeded in preventing this, at Sforzi and the girl for having pulled the job in the face of his warning. With this, Mavis became "the girl." That she had become a mere individual in a criminal case cut him jaggedly, like a ripsaw.

He barged into the manager's office, flashed his identification to the two detectives, said he'd listen in, might have something to say from the Federal end.

Sforzi glanced at him. Mavis sat down and stared at him.

It seemed that a young lady, late that afternoon, had lifted stones to the tune of just a little over a hundred thousand dollars from the jeweler's. The young lady was said to be named Miss Mavis Ward. The man from the shop identified her from previous visits, from actually knowing her name and where she worked. She had come three or four times to look for something a rich admirer meant to buy for her. So she said.

Mavis took in the accusation silently, registering a neat combination of bewilderment and indignation. Brad watched her when she said there must be some mistake, some terrible mistake. He felt sorry for her, for himself.

"I don't understand," she said. "I've never been in that shop. And I couldn't have been there this afternoon."

"Because I was out walking in the park," she explained, "until nearly six."

That, said the detectives, was interesting. And was she walking with anybody who could prove that?

"Why, yes. With Mr. Farodny." She indicated Mr. Farodny.

"How about that, Mr. Farodny?" one of the detectives wanted to know.

Sforzi, who had been standing with a puzzled expression on his face, drew himself up. "One moment," he said. "I wish to know if you are seriously accusing Miss Ward of this theft?"

"We're seriously getting around to the idea," he was told.

"And you, sir," Sforzi asked the jeweler, "are you certain that it was Miss Ward who—well, looked at your stones?"

"I'm positive she stole them."

Sforzi looked at Mavis as if he was entirely disillusioned. "Then I can only say," he announced, "that I cannot oblige the lady. I was about to substantiate her statement that she was walking in the park with me. As a favor, let us say. But in so serious a matter, I naturally do not care to incriminate myself. Miss Ward is mistaken."

Mavis jumped up with a cry. She took a step toward him, her eyes wide with astonishment, with anger. "You—you . . . but you know you were with me! You know it! How can you say you weren't?"

Sforzi shrugged his shoulders and was silent.

Mavis stuttered. "Why—why—!" She looked about at the accusing faces. She stared at Sforzi as if she couldn't believe what he had said. Then, limply, she sank back in her chair. She sat, still staring, slow fear creeping into her face. She started to say something more, but couldn't. Then, finally, choked out that she knew nothing about the robbery. It sounded peculiar, as if it wasn't as important as Sforzi's denial.

The detectives asked Farodny what he knew about the girl. He said he knew little. He had met her at a Beaux-Arts Ball. He was fond of dancing, and had come to the school to keep in practice. He had taken Miss Ward to luncheon on several occasions. Their acquaintanceship had not gone beyond that. He knew nothing else. He proffered his card and prepared to withdraw.

Brad let him reach the door. Then he said, "Just a minute. No one leaves yet."

Sforzi turned, with his hand on the doorknob, and raised his eyebrows at the plainclothesmen. They indicated that he was to stay.

Brad took charge. He didn't work on Sforzi. What he hoped was that he would work up to him. There was no use asking the jeweler if he had ever seen Farodny before. He wouldn't have seen him. There was no use asking Sforzi where he had spent the afternoon. By now Brad had a pretty good idea, but it wouldn't coincide with Sforzi's alibi, which would be cast-iron. Brad had watched Mavis closely while her own alibi was shattered. That wasn't acting. It was the real thing. Here was a simple double-cross. Yet not so simple.

He looked at Mavis, who sat as if in a trance. For an instant an instinctive belief in Mavis, as unreasonable as it had been when he first saw her picture in the paper, came to Brad. Then it left him. No matter how much he wanted to be sure of her, he couldn't be. Not when she was in as far as this. Not when he remembered the times he had seen her with Sforzi. Not when he couldn't get away from the recognition she had given him that day in the restaurant. It was romantic to be loyal to the girl you loved, but he had been in his business long enough to know that everything, everybody, had to be proved. You couldn't take anything for granted. Not even Mavis.

It was up to him to prove her, one way or the other. Not a sweet prospect when he viewed the setup. The last thing he wanted to do.

He turned to the detectives, to the jeweler, to Sforzi. "Come on," he said, "we're all going places."

Sforzi didn't object. At least he didn't put his comment in the form of a protest. "I expect," he said, politely, "that you are going to investigate Miss Ward's place of residence. Is it really necessary," he inquired, "for me to accompany you?"

"You might be able to help us," Brad told him.

Sforzi said he didn't understand. Mentioned something about an engagement. Was sure he wasn't needed.

"We can't get along without you," Brad said.

They went to East Sixty-first Street and stopped before the apartment house to which Brad had tailed Sforzi before, and out of which he had seen him come with Mavis. Mavis looked more mystified than alarmed. Or pretended to be. Sforzi's nerves were good. Or he didn't have anything to be nervous about.

They trooped into a small entrance. There were eight brass letterboxes set in the wall. Brad bent over, examined the names on them, studied them. He grunted, straightened, and then led the way into the building, up the stairs.

On the first floor he stopped the procession before a door, made sure of the name, and rang the bell. The door opened and a large woman confronted them. Brad looked at her in disappointment.

"Sorry," he said. "We have the wrong apartment."

The woman watched them start up to the second floor. Her door slammed when they were on the stairs to the third. Brad stopped before another door. He stood there, watching two of his party. Sforzi's nerves were still good. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. As if this was a waste of time that had nothing to do with him. Mavis was silent and tense. As if the strain was getting to her.

Brad rang. The TV was going inside the apartment. Almost as soon as his finger touched the button, it was turned off. No one came to the door. It was silent inside. He rang again. Then he waited. An uncommonly long time passed. It looked as if the door wasn't going to be opened.

Slowly, cautiously, it edged inward. Maybe two inches. Someone peered out. There was a gasp and the door started to close, fast.

Brad got his foot against it just in time. He pushed it open again. Wide. There was the sound of someone running down the hall of the apartment. Brad leaped into the hall.

When Mavis, the two detectives, Sforzi, and the jeweler entered the living room of the apartment, Brad had a glowering young woman cor-

nered between the end of a divan and the wall. He called Mavis over and told her to stand by the girl's side. Mavis gave a startled exclamation, not at the request, which she obeyed, but at the appearance of the second woman.

To see them both together like that, you could tell the difference at once. By two or three comparisons. One was easily an inch taller than the other. One had a soft expression in her face, the other's was hard. If you stared closely enough you could see that the saffron of one head of hair was artificial, while that of the other was natural.

"Let me introduce the second of the only two single women living in this apartment house," Brad said. "Miss Darby. Or so the letter-box said. It doesn't matter for the moment." He turned to the jeweler. "Now," he asked, "which one took your stones?"

The jeweler, dumbfounded, confessed, "I—I don't know. Except that Miss Ward was known by name."

"Exactly," Brad said. "She was meant to be known by name." He looked at Sforzi. The man's nerves weren't quite as good. His eagle eyes moved, toward the hall, at the bulk of the two detectives. Brad didn't have him yet. Not until the stones had been turned up, and maybe not even then.

"The lift," he went on, "was pulled in such a way that a woman had to be recognized. Somebody had to take the blame. Miss Ward was chosen because she looked enough like the Darby here, for the Darby to be made up to look even more like her. Sforzi, or as you know him, Farodny, studied that. I saw him with each of them and couldn't tell the difference between them. Not until I remembered that when I saw him with the Darby it was at night, in a badly-lighted bar, or when she was mostly behind a hat. The other time, it was actually Miss Ward. This afternoon, while the Darby was dealing in precious stones, Sforzi walked in the park with Miss Ward so she couldn't prove she was anywhere else."

He turned to the detectives. "You know a frame when you smell one," he told them. "Take a whiff."

While the plainclothesmen were taking in lungfuls, Sforzi didn't say anything. He lighted a cigarette and stood pat. The Darby kept quiet, though she glared fixedly at the search of the apartment. Not until the jeweler was delighted to have his stones come to light in the bottom of a sugar bag in the kitchen did the Darby speak.

"I told you it wouldn't work!" she blazed at Sforzi. "You and your fixing it for somebody else to take the rap! Look who's taking it now!"

Back at the school of dancing, Brad took his tenth lesson from Mavis. They moved about easily, almost professionally, together. "How do you like that new step?" he inquired. "I just invented it."

"I live on Eleventh Street," she told him. She gave him the number as they whirled, one way, then the other.

"Have I got that left turn all right now?" he asked.

"Any partner would be proud of you," she whispered.



Death Is a Lonely Lover

by Robert Colby

Carl Koenig: I came apart like a toy watch when I read about Lorrie Proctor in the newspapers. They had just found her body—six months and thirteen days after it happened. Beside her in the grave was her pocketbook containing her keys, a driver's license, and other papers. She was wearing the same pale pink dress of that night when we were together for the last time, and now the rotted fragments of it covered a skeleton.

She was also wearing my engagement ring, an item which wouldn't bring five bucks at a pawnshop. Her killers didn't even bother to remove it. Try to picture that tarnished band wobbling around on one bony little finger.

When the news broke and I read that pathetic bit about the ring, I cried. Later, when I was calm and empty of all but the hate which had grown like an extra organ inside me, I knew it was time to kill—no, execute—the four people responsible for Lorrie's murder.

I had been ready a long time because that little voice in my head told me that Lorrie was dead. Yet did you ever hear of a judge passing sentence on a hunch? No, I had to wait until her death was a fact.

You might think I would go to the police. Listen, I *did* go to the police—right in the beginning, right after it happened. I was barely conscious from the beating I had taken, but the police thought I was drunk. They gave me a hard time. When I finally squeezed some oil of truth into those mechanical brains with which some cops come equipped, it was too late. They couldn't find clue one. Even when they had recovered her body and the stuff buried with her, they came up with exactly nothing.

I broke contact with the police after the first week and moved from the address I had given them without giving a forwarding. When I could see that there would never be any legal justice, I kept what I knew to myself and prepared my own justice in secret.

Lorrie had *six* killers, but the law was aware of only *two* and would

condemn only two as guilty of the crime. Such is the blindness and stupidity of legal justice. Since I could not find the two who were wanted by the law, the other four had to die first.

There were two men and two women. I decided that the women should precede the men. The men should be made to suffer their loss as I had suffered the loss of Lorrie.

The women were Nancy Jarrett and Vera Wynn. I chose a night and phoned to see if Nancy were at home. She was. I faked a wrong number and hung up.

I had been over the route several times before and I had no trouble finding the house. It was a bright yellow Cape Cod sort of cottage off Wilshire in West L.A. Amber light jeweled its windows, and set against the darkness, it looked snug and inviting. It had a phony air of innocence and cheer.

I parked a ways beyond and cut the lights of my station wagon. My dog, a sleek Doberman and a trained man-killer, was in back. I gave him an affectionate pat and, more from habit than necessity, told him to stand guard. An order to such an animal is something like cocking a loaded gun, and much more reliable.

Carrying a package under my arm, I climbed out and walked toward the house. I was wearing dark slacks, a light blue jacket and a matching visored hat, plus a thin pair of gloves. Most people are gullible, and if you offer something for nothing, any half-baked uniform will seem official enough.

I stood at her door, but through a near window I could see she was huddled in an easy chair before the television, her stocking feet propped up on an ottoman.

She was alone, but that wasn't news to me. Her husband, Bruce Jarrett, was a radio engineer. He worked half the night at the transmitter, a lonely little hut beside a signal tower which sprouted from the crest of a hill. It was a beautiful spot for what came later.

I rang the bell, saw her start, scramble into her shoes, approach. She opened the door to the extent of a chain-guard and peeped out.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Jarrett?"

"Yes, it is."

"Package for you, ma'am. Special delivery."

"Oh, my! All right." She released the chain and swung the door wide.

She was a small woman in her late twenties with a wolf-whistle figure. She was rather pretty, I suppose, but I didn't really notice. She waited expectantly for me to offer the package.

"You'll have to sign," I said, tapping a printed slip tucked under the cord binding the box. "It's registered."

"Heavens, how important!" she sang.

"You got a pencil?" I asked, like I was bored with the whole routine. "Every other delivery I lose a pencil to some joker."

"Hold on," she answered. "I'll get you one."

She went away, into the living room. I sprang inside, eased the door shut behind me, just in time. She was returning with the pencil, coming a bit unglued when she found me standing there on the wrong side of the door.

She hesitated a few feet from me, her eyes searching my face for a danger signal. That was when I lifted a flap at the end of the box close to my body, reached in, and yanked the box free.

I thought her jaw would fall right off her face when she looked down the barrel of that sawed-off shotgun.

I said, "Do just as I tell you, Nancy. Otherwise, I might spread you all over the room."

She took a step backward. The pencil fell from her hand. "Who—who are you?" she asked in a kind of whisper.

"It'll come to you, Nancy, before long. I'll help you remember. Now go and draw the curtains—every one!"

She hesitated, moistened her lips, swallowed.

"Hurry, Nancy. Hurry!" I centered the barrel between her eyes. Watching me, fascinated, she backed, sidestepped. She closed a drape, then another, until it was done. Then I stepped into the living room.

"What do you want?" she asked. "I have a few dollars in my purse. Please take them and leave."

"Where do you keep your purse, Nancy?"

"In—in the bedroom."

"Well then, let's go and get it."

"No!" She shook her head violently. "I don't believe you. It isn't money you want at all."

"You're a real thinker, Nancy." She backed off as I moved toward her.

Suddenly she turned and ran. I danced after her, caught her in the kitchen. She was hurling herself at the back door. Her fingers swarmed

all over it, like crazy worms, trying to find the bolt in the dark.

I slammed the side of her head with the gun barrel. She fell, whimpering.

"Oh, please," she moaned. "Please, what have I ever done to you?"

I told her. She was on the floor staring up at me and I was holding the muzzle of the shotgun a foot from her face. When I stopped talking, I squeezed the trigger.

After the sound died, I bent to look at her. She had no face—no face at all.

Del Wynn: I hadn't seen Bruce or Nancy Jarrett for nearly a month. Although Vera and I were close friends of the Jarretts, we had moved to the other side of town and it was inconvenient to get together as often as we did when we lived practically around the corner.

Still, in that dreadful state of shock, I don't imagine Bruce would have come running over to tell us that Nancy had just been murdered. Further, the news did not reach the papers until afternoon of the following day. However, I got the story about mid-morning from an entirely different source:

A couple of detectives came to see me at my office in Burbank. I was working as a PR man for an aircraft company and I had my own private cubbyhole.

After they had settled in chairs before my desk, Sergeant Newbold lighted a cigarette offered by his partner, Detective Ferguson, then told me abruptly that Nancy Jarrett had been blasted to death with a shotgun charge which all but tore her head from her body.

I was extremely fond of Nancy and it took me a minute or so to recover my composure.

I could see that Newbold had more to say, but he waited patiently and made comforting sounds in a flat, cool voice which seemed as if it had long ago been drained of any emotion.

"Bad as it is, Mr. Wynn, I wish that were the end of it," he continued. "But I suppose you guessed we wouldn't be here unless there were additional details involving you. Also your wife."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," I said blankly.

"The killer left something behind," Newbold said, and passed me a small square of white paper which showed typed names and a few rusty splotches of blood. I studied the paper:

ORDER OF EXECUTION

Nancy Jarrett✓

Vera Wynn

Bruce Jarrett

Del Wynn

My name and Vera's leaped out at me!

"As you see," Newbold said evenly, "Mrs. Jarrett's name has been checked off. The rest is obvious." He extended his hand and I gave him the list. "This paper was pinned to Nancy Jarrett's blouse," he went on as he folded the paper and tucked it into his wallet.

I said, "Why should anyone want to kill me, or my wife?"

"Why should anyone want to kill Nancy Jarrett?" Ferguson asked with a wry twist of his lips.

Newbold nodded agreement. "Do you know why, Mr. Wynn?"

"No," I said numbly.

"In any case, the killer planted that list to scare hell out of you people."

"Speaking for myself, it does just that." I sent him a weak smile.

"There's got to be a connection," Ferguson reasoned. "You're all linked to something. Any idea what it might be?"

"Not the least," I told him. "The Jarretts've been friends for a couple of years. We lived close by, got together about once a week. We played bridge or went to movies, night spots—things like that. Perfectly innocent stuff, never any trouble."

Newbold squashed his cigarette in my desk tray. "You belong to any mutual societies, clubs, lodges—any sort of organization in which you were all members?"

"None. Nothing like that."

"Maybe you all went to a party," said Ferguson, groping. "There was an argument, a fight. You four took sides against someone."

I shook my head. "Never. Listen, you've got a point, but you're moving in the wrong direction. Let me say from the beginning that, as a foursome, we didn't take sides against anyone. There were no fights, physical or verbal. We're all mild enough, certainly not belligerent, and we kept pretty much to ourselves."

Newbold shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Can you think of a time when some guy made a pass at one of the wives, causing a public scene?"

"No."

"Or there was some, uh, private incident. When you men heard about it later, you took action."

"Absolutely not. That would make it easier to understand."

Newbold sighed. "Take your time, think about this from every angle, all the way back, inside and out. Examine anything that has a taint of friction. The smallest event is important."

We were silent for a space as I forced my mind to poke in every corner of the total relationship. "Sorry," I said, "there just isn't anything at all to work with. And believe me, I'm a lot more anxious to get at the truth than you boys could ever be."

"Then we've got a psycho on our hands," Newbold said firmly, "someone who merely imagines that he or she has been given a rough time by you people. True or not, it doesn't help. The end result is the same."

"We're just as dead, you mean."

"Exactly."

"You think he'll go through with it, Sergeant?"

"Nancy Jarrett was no bluff."

"Can't you stop it?"

"We can try to find him," Ferguson said. "That's the only sure way."

"Don't count on finding him too soon," Newbold warned.

"I want protection," I snapped. "My wife is next, you know. Can't you give us a guard or two?"

"I could do that, yes," Newbold answered. "For how long?"

"I don't know. Indefinitely. Until he's caught."

"Impossible. We don't have the manpower for a long period of guard duty. We get maybe half a dozen calls a week asking for protection, one reason or another, and turn them all down. Of course, this is a quite different case, the need is obvious. But after a couple of days or so we'd only have to call our men back."

"What good are the police, then?"

"How would you like to live without us?" His smile had an edge.

"Let me tell you something, Mr. Wynn," Ferguson said. "If a man is set and determined to kill you without fear of consequences, he'll get the job done, sooner or later. All he needs is patience, a suitable weapon, and a decent plan."

"Coming from a policeman, that's a lousy piece of information," I growled.

"At least it's honest," Newbold defended. "It's realistic."

"No, it's plain negative," I said bitterly. "Maybe we should give up and pin targets to our backs!"

"Not at all," replied Newbold calmly. "We're starting with rock-bottom truth. Awareness is a kind of armor. President Kennedy was guarded by the FBI, the Secret Service, and about half the police force of Dallas. One man got to him. That's a sad fact, but the truth."

"We're only trying to show you that the best watchdogs guarding each one of you night and day is no guarantee of safety. We've got to do a lot more. We've got to hunt this killer down and put him away! And we'll be hard at it, that's a promise."

"Meanwhile, if you and your wife can afford to slip out of town undercover, fine. If not, take every precaution. Perhaps the best precaution is for you two to get together with Jarrett and come up with an answer. When and where did you make yourselves an enemy? Who and why?"

He passed me his card. "Just as soon as you can tell me that, call me. Day or night . . ."

Nothing worked in our favor. We couldn't afford the expense of leaving town and my job might not be there when I returned. More, Bruce Jarrett was no help at all. The poor guy was too broken to help us discover where or how we had made an enemy and didn't seem to care.

Vera made a big try, but together we couldn't pick up a single thread. I kept her locked in the house with a small automatic I had bought her, and she was not to open the door for anyone. I called five or six times a day to be certain she was all right.

Mornings I ducked into my car and raced to the office, then raced back. We had laid in a supply of staples and frozen goods. We never left the house after dark. Most of this was done for Vera's sake. I don't scare easily; I am only bothered by an enemy I can't see—who won't come out and fight in the open.

In the third week, at lunchtime on Valentine's Day, I phoned Vera from the office. She thanked me sweetly for my card and again mentioned the little bottle of perfume I had given her that morning. The mail had come just a minute before my call and she had received a heart-shaped box of chocolate-covered cherries from her brother in Pasadena.

Delighted, she opened the box as we talked and I heard her munching. Then she made a small gasping sound and there was a thud, as if the receiver had been dropped to the floor.

I drove wildly, with mindless abandon. A cop raced after me. He was

a bright one and gave me a full-siren escort after I explained, but death and cyanide are only seconds apart. Vera was gone when I reached her.

Bruce Jarrett: Del Wynn just left. He made a special trip out to the transmitter this evening, and since mine is a one-man job with nothing much required but to log the meter readings and do an occasional bit of maintenance, we had time for a long talk.

When Vera Wynn was poisoned and I saw that Del was man enough to put aside his wretchedness and take a stand for doing something about the murders other than weeping behind locked doors, I was ashamed. I agreed to help him make a real effort to put the killer or killers of Nancy and Vera in the gas chamber. It would be a kind of ironic justice for Del, since cyanide is used to execute murderers under capital punishment in the state of California.

Because of the threat to my life, a special patrol of the area had been ordered. Working alone at the transmitter made me a vulnerable target, so I kept the only door locked and made Del go around to a window where I could see him before I let him in.

We shook hands and I said, "Well, how are you bearing up?"

He didn't answer. Instead he went past me to a chair by the control board and sat down. I took my place behind the panel. Music was blaring from the monitor so I reached for the fader and lowered the gain.

"You look beat down," I said. "I suppose you're going through the same emotions—the lost feeling, the sleepless nights full of images and memories. I think it's the little things you remember that get to you when you lie there and—".

"Shut up!" he barked. "Please just keep it to yourself, will ya?"

"Well, now listen, Del, I was only trying to—"

"Sure, sure," he said, waving me off. "But that stuff is all downhill—nowhere. I have the same feelings, but I can't afford to indulge them right now. Let's cry later and get to work. O.K.?"

"Sorry," I said woundedly.

Ignoring me, he got up and paced a moment before he said, "I think we've got to try a new approach. We need tangible clues. It'll be a long process, but there's only one way to find them."

"How?"

"We'll start from the ground up—from the first day we four met. On paper we'll make a chronological list of every single occasion when we

were all together. We'll put a label to each date. When that's done we'll go back again to the beginning and talk in the details, *st p by step*."

"It might work," I said, "but it could take half the night."

"Got anything better to do? Then find a pencil and some paper."

It went much faster than we had expected. We had drawn up a time-table of events and had discussed the details of the first fourteen months in less than two hours—drawing a blank. Then the phone rang.

It was Lieutenant Thatcher of Homicide. I had met him only once; most of my dealings were with Sergeant Newbold and his partner. Thatcher was hot on the case, working with the night trick. He had the mug shot of a suspect he wanted me to identify. He was sending a Detective Murray Gladstone with it in about an hour.

I asked for the name of the suspect in the mug shot, but he said he was going to withhold the name and let *me* tell *him*. It would be more conclusive.

I shared the news with Del. He said Thatcher was probably groping in the dark and it was a long shot. We went on with the task.

Nothing developed until we reached a night in the summer of last year. This particular foursome was labeled: *Malibu for dinner at the Lockwoods'. Drinks at The Point, followed by drive along coast*.

"We were about to discard this one also when Del said, "Wait a minute! We didn't just cap the night with a drive and then go home. Don't you remember? We pulled off the coast highway into a parking area by the beach. We sat looking down at the ocean and we made a big funny deal about necking like kids."

"So?"

"So there was one other car in there, about a hundred feet off to the right. I'm not sure, because it was dark and cloudy that night and I never did get the whole picture, but I think there were two, or maybe three men in the car—and a girl. The men had a fight and the girl screamed. Now do you remember?"

I nodded. "Sure, a bunch of drunks having a brawl. So what?"

"At the time, nothing much, though it did upset me. But now, in the light of all this, I think it's worth a close look."

It was. In fact, once the scene was dredged up from my memory with Del's prodding, I had the awful conviction that this was the moment of truth about the murders and about myself. I can only guess that some Freudian block kept the memory locked in that secret closet of the mind

where we hide from ourselves—because, by an accident of circumstance, I had seen more of that fight than the others, and for reasons of my own, remained silent.

We were using my car that night and after I parked at the edge of a shallow cliff above the beach, I sat listening to the others jabbering a minute, then got out and went for a stroll. I was cold sober but I had been mixing my drinks on top of a heavy meal and I hoped to walk off a sneaky feeling that I was about to be sick.

I was returning when I heard a low moan, as of a man in pain, then scuffling sounds. It came from the area of the other car quite close behind me, and I turned to look.

Three men and a girl were caught dimly in the splay of lights from a passing car. One man had another on the ground at his feet and was booting his ribs viciously. He came to life, scrambled out of range, and struggled to his feet. The man brought him down again with a clubbing motion, though if there was something in his hand I couldn't see it because his massive back was to me.

The third man had a tight hold on the girl's wrist, their heads were turned to watch the beating. Suddenly the girl broke away and ran. The man who had been clutching her wrist chased and caught her. He gave her a wicked backhand across the face and she screamed. The scream drew the attention of the kicker and he went jogging toward them.

Farther removed, talking noisily among themselves; Del, Vera, and my wife had seen nothing, had heard nothing but the scream. Alarmed, they then climbed from the car to look. I hurried up to them. There was safety in numbers and I was afraid.

The men were powerfully built animals and there was about them and their actions an aura of savage brutality. I could almost feel the bones of my face splintering under the impact of cast-iron fists, my ribs kicked in at the point of a stone-hard toe. I detest all forms of violence, I can't bear pain, and I did not want to become involved.

On the other hand, Del Wynn was fearless and he welcomed a good fight. If I gave him the true picture, he would plow in with fists flying. What, then, could I do? Stand and watch? I would be naked before them, an exposed coward. Below the surface, Nancy would never understand or forgive.

"What's goin' on over there?" asked Del. He was straining to see in the gloom. Except when the lights of a passing car brought the figures

out of darkness for a few seconds, they were mere shadows.

"Bunch of drunks," I said, "fighting over some cookie. Kid stuff."

"We heard a scream," said Nancy.

"The boy friend gave her a little slap," I belittled. "Probably she was flirting and he was jealous." For all I knew, that might be close. "Nothing to it. C'mon, let's hit the road."

"Maybe we ought to go over and teach them some manners," said Del, molding a fist in his palm.

"Nahh, I wouldn't hit some lousy staggering drunk. That's one thing I never do—punch a drunk."

Del sent me a probing glance but said nothing. He seemed about to turn away, but just then a car moving along the coast highway came out of the north and splashed the scene with light.

Two of the men stood facing the girl, one shaking a finger in her face. The third, the injured one, was climbing to his feet. As if to back my story, he swayed and looked very drunk as he faced us and waved in a loose, awkward signal for help. At the same time he shouted something at us. It came out garbled—again, as if he were drunk.

Now, as the car on the highway swirled past, he stumbled toward the two men and the girl and was lost in the darkness.

"That guy is in trouble," said Del. "I'm gonna find out what kind. You comin', Bruce?"

"Can't you see he's drunk?" Vera said. "Please, Del, leave it alone. I don't want you mixed up with a bunch of drunks brawling over some little tramp."

"She's right," I agreed. "None of our business anyway. Let's go!"

Ignoring us, Del moved off deliberately. He hadn't gone but a few steps when the car backed, circled, and rocketed away, racing without lights until it reached the highway.

That seemed the end of it, but when my car neared the exit, a narrow opening in a chain fence because a parking fee was collected during the day, a man rose up and weaved toward us. It was the man who had taken the beating. He was young, dark-haired, and slender; His clothes were torn and disordered, but there didn't seem to be a mark on him.

The very sight of this guy looming up suddenly to confront us was astonishing. When he vanished, we had all assumed that he had driven off with the others despite the fracas.

As I drew abreast of the man he grabbed the window frame and said

something idiotic which sounded like, "Worry, worry." His eyes were wild and hugely dilated, there was a definite smell of whiskey on his breath.

He sagged and fell to the ground. I paused a few feet beyond him, waiting for a hole in traffic. The women wanted to take him along but he didn't look hurt and I was against it. Unexpectedly, Del backed me up. "Stoned out of his mind," he said. "Let'm sleep it off."

That settled it, we left him. The incident crept into my mind briefly the next day but there is nothing I can rationalize and forget so quickly as any situation which tends to accuse me. I never thought of it again.

Yet now that Del had revived the experience and I could see a possible connection to the nightmare of murder and threat which followed long after, I didn't hesitate. I told him exactly what happened and why I had kept silent.

He paced across the room, turned. "Don't you get it!" he cried. "One guy is holding the girl, the other is beating the man, kicking his ribs in. Was that a drunken brawl over a dame? Right now we've got every reason to damn well believe it wasn't!"

"I'll spell it out for you. Two of those guys were probably there for just one reason—to rob the man and take his girl off somewhere to rape her. Then what? Chances are ten to one they were afraid to turn her loose, so they murdered her.

"The girl's husband, boy friend, or whatever, sees the four of us watching like it was some kind of sideshow. So he goes psycho. He tracks us down and takes his revenge."

"We're absolute strangers," I objected. "How does he find us?"

"Yeah, that part had me boxed, but it just came to me that the only possible answer is too simple. He got your license number and he made a point to remember it. From there he just followed his nose, that's all."

Something hard and accusing crept into Del's eyes. He moved toward me with his big jaw clenched and his fists balled. He stood poised above me.

"Two of us are dead and the other two might as well be dead," he hissed. "Why didn't you drive us all over a cliff that night, Bruce? We'd've been better off!"

For a moment I thought he might knock me out of the chair, but he turned abruptly and left without looking back. I heard his car thunder off and fade down the hill. . .

Carl Koenig: I read that Vera Wynn is very dead. Certain types of candy don't seem to agree with her. It was quite clever the way I did it. I injected each piece with a shot of poison from a hypodermic syringe, leaving an invisible hole.

I had spent weeks snooping secretly, linking the Wynns to the Jarretts and gathering information about each one of the four. Posing as an investigator for a credit bureau I asked a few guarded questions and got some useful answers. One fact led to another and I soon discovered that Vera had a brother who was a real estate agent in Pasadena. When I found out where he lived, I put his return address on the package of poisoned candy.

I'm still laughing.

A while ago I called Bruce Jarrett at the transmitter to set him up for the kill. I told him I was Lieutenant Thatcher of Homicide, a name I got from a newspaper report on Nancy Jarrett's execution. I told Jarrett I was sending Detective Murray Gladstone with a mug shot.

Gladstone is not a phony name, he's a real cop and was the first one to talk to me after they found out that I wasn't drunk; I had a fractured skull and a couple of busted ribs, to say nothing of a ruptured spleen. I was in and out of a coma then, and Gladstone didn't get through to me until after they had operated and I had recovered enough to make sense.

I didn't lie about the drinking. Sure, I had quite a few, but I wasn't drunk. I had at least half a dozen drinks with Lorrie that Friday night. We had a lot to celebrate. We were getting married the next weekend and that day I had sold the interest in a marine supply store which my father left me a few months back when he died.

I had been working as a clerk in the store and I was always broke. Now I had a few thousand and I was planning to buy out a boat rental business. Also, I could afford to get Lorrie a new ring, a real diamond, although she claimed to have a sentimental attachment to the old one and wouldn't part with it.

Then there was this little furnished house in Venice where we were going to live after we were married. Lorrie said it was "cute," but it was kinda shabby on the outside. I took it because it had a fenced yard and they didn't object to my Doberman, big and mean as he is. I had just signed the lease and paid a couple of months' rent in advance. Like I said, we had a lot to celebrate.

On the night I lost Lorrie I was living in two rooms over a garage south of Pico in Santa Monica. My station wagon had a bad battery and when I went to start it, the battery was dead. I phoned Lorrie and she picked me up in her sedan. I didn't want to take the dog in her car so I left him home. That was a fatal mistake. But for a dead battery, Lorrie might be alive today.

We were pretty well loaded and very gay when we pulled into this parking strip by the ocean. It was a cloudy, moonless night. Once in a while there would be a wash of headlights from the coast highway but otherwise it was a blackout. There was only one other car in the area, nosed in quite a ways from us—a comfortable distance, you might say.

I was behind the wheel. We had been talking it up and loving it up for about five minutes. Suddenly, my door was yanked open and something struck me across the side of the head. When I came to I was lying on the ground. A hand was exploring for my wallet, snatching it. I felt dizzy and disoriented. I waited for my head to clear.

A car passing on the highway showered us with a sidespray of light and I saw Lorrie standing by the sedan. This ape had his paw locked around her wrist and I knew what was up—I got the picture. I tried to rise but the other goon began to play football with my ribs. One of those kicks went wild and ruptured my spleen, but of course I didn't know it then.

I rolled out of range and made another try for my feet. I saw the blackjack whipping down but it was too late to duck. A hot poker stabbed my brain. I don't even remember falling. Distantly I heard Lorrie scream and I knew I had to hold on.

From that moment everything became distorted, as if seen under water. Somehow I was on my feet, balanced on a tightrope. Under the sweep of headlights I saw the two couples standing beside their car, gaping at me dumbly as I shouted and waved madly, beckoning for them to come and help me save Lorrie.

I couldn't believe it! They were wax dummies rooted in place. We were actors, and they were watching our poor performance with barely concealed yawns.

These soulless mechanical beings considered themselves mere bystanders who were above soiling themselves by becoming involved in a messy struggle to save a stranger from being robbed and beaten senseless while a frail, defenseless girl was mauled and taken off to be raped and murdered.

What was the matter with those two gutless, husky men? And why didn't their women run for the police? Why didn't *anyone* send for the police!

There was no time to wonder. Moving like a sailor on a heaving deck, I went toward Lorrie and the animals attacking her.

I heard her car being fired up and I ran. I made a dive onto the rear deck and clung to it. We shot to the exit and then one of those hoods leaned out and hammered my hand with his sap. I let go.

I don't remember standing, but there I was, squinting into headlights. The car with the two couples drew up beside me. I saw their blank faces, their eyes watching me curiously as I made a grab for the door.

"Lorrie, Lorrie," I said to the driver, my own voice sounding far away, submerged. "Help Lorrie!" He gazed at me with a sneer of contempt, of disdain. He drove on, braked at the highway, as I went down again. I looked up from the ground and saw the blonde woman, Vera Wynn, leaning out the window, staring back at me. There was an odd twist to her lips, as if she might burst out laughing at any moment.

The blonde and her friends were something out of a dream, a mocking, violent dream. A great surging hate mounted inside me. I despised these people and all the self-loving, coddled ones of their breed.

Exhaust fumes choked me. I glanced up and saw the lighted tag. I read the license and wrote it in giant neon on the front wall of my mind. As the car sped away I repeated it over and over until it became a permanent fixture in my memory.

Later, a patrol car, making a routine check, hauled me semi-conscious to the drunk tank of the county jail. My injuries were not visible, these cops said later. My thick hair hid a broken skull. I talked, looked, and smelled like a drunk. It was three days before I could tell a coherent story to Detective Gladstone, but by then the trail was cold.

Now, having borrowed Gladstone's name and dressed for the part, I drove up the winding road to the transmitter. A squad car, searchlight poking in dark corners, was circling the building. I went on by and when I returned it was gone. I wheeled in and parked.

I got out and brought the Doberman along on a leash. He hadn't been fed all day. At the last minute I had merely teased him with a few scraps of meat, allowing him a couple of morsels from the bowl, then removing it. He was in a savage mood.

I hammered the door with my fist. Jarrett came to the other side and asked in a nervous voice who it was. I told him I was Murray Gladstone from Homicide, but he wanted to look at me through the window.

I knew he wouldn't recognize me, so I went to the window and, keeping the dog out of sight, showed him a fake badge. He frowned, hesitated, then left to open the door.

"Sorry," he said, "but you can't be too careful."

He studied me. "Say, have you been on this case before? I'm sure we—"

Then he saw the animal coiled beside me, jaws gaping, fangs gleaming. The head was lifted sharply, the eyes impaling Jarrett with unblinking malice.

"Brought you a little friend," I told Jarrett, and planted my foot determinedly against the door.

I removed the leash and as Jarrett backed, the dog advanced with a deep soft growl. I closed the door behind me. Jarrett was darting looks over his shoulder for a weapon, a route of escape. A jazzy discord of sound filtered from a speaker, adding a touch of unreality.

The Doberman came to a halt and stood crouching, poised. I gave him an order: "Lorrie—says—kill!"

Jarrett had reached back to clutch a chair and was trying to raise it when the animal launched himself and fell upon him, attacking him in a snarling, snapping frenzy.

Jarrett moaned, cried out as his fingers circled the dog's neck, tightening desperately. Oblivious, the Doberman tore chunks from his face until he screamed and relaxed his grip. Then, with a snake-like thrust, the dog fanged his throat.

That was the end of him, but I allowed myself another full minute of delicious satisfaction before I called the dog off.

He turned instantly, trotted over, and stood waiting for praise, looking up with a crimson grin of expectancy.

Del Wynn: Sergeant Newbold phoned close to eleven P.M. to tell me that Bruce Jarrett has been murdered—literally torn apart, mutilated by some savage animal, probably a killer dog. Bruce was discovered soon after his death by the chief engineer, alerted when Bruce failed to answer a call from the studio.

Why, oh why, did I leave!

I had been trying to locate Newbold to tell him that Bruce and I were certain we had discovered the motive behind the murders, that we had information he could use to identify the killer and hunt him down. Newbold was out and the desk man said he would try to locate him by radio. I didn't make a big issue of the matter since I assumed that Bruce would make a full report to this Detective Murray Gladstone who was enroute to see him at the transmitter.

Newbold was astonished. He informed me that Detective Gladstone had not been on the case for months. It didn't take a minute to guess that our "executioner" was the fake Murray Gladstone.

Newbold was excited about the beach parking lot affair last summer. He agreed that we had probably uncovered the truth. He had the man's name on file—Carl Koenig, a former marine supply store sales clerk who had vanished.

Koenig had been engaged to a Lorrie Proctor. She had been abducted after parking with Koenig by the ocean, her skeleton had recently been found in a grave beside a desert highway. Koenig had been terribly beaten defending her.

At this late date, with the whole bloody horror nearly at an end, plainclothes cops are being sent to stake out my apartment house to prevent my murder and arrest Koenig when he makes his move toward me, as he certainly will before many days have passed. Further, I will have an armed escort to and from work.

What a filthy joke! I want to tell them, "Listen, thanks a lot, boys, but aren't you just a bit too late?" Instead, I keep silent and wait sleeplessly with a gun at my elbow.

I am exhausted in body and spirit. I am indescribably depressed.

Carl Koenig: From the very first step of the plan I had an uncanny sense of timing and superb judgment. I never made a mistake. With three down and one to go, with the newscasters shouting about "an unparalleled manhunt in progress," I still had the same feeling of god-like power and invincibility.

The sluggish machinery of the law was finally in high gear and, following the execution of Jarrett, it came to me at once that I must not delay, that I must put the last of Lorrie's known murderers to death in the next hour or two. The police could be stampeded into action by the prodding of headlines and the politically inspired whippings of their dull masters.

I went back to the rented house in Venice where I had been living all these months. It was the same shabby little house which I had leased as a place for Lorrie and me after we were married. The house was rented at the last minute, on the very day Lorrie was murdered, and I had told no one about it.

I left the dog in the car because I figured he might come in handy. I went inside and took a used leather suitcase, bought for the occasion, from a closet. The case was filled with paper-wrapped pieces of scrap iron. Atop the suitcase I placed a grey overcoat and a grey felt hat.

I washed and checked my clothing for bloodstains. Then I adjusted shell-rimmed glasses to my face, a pair I used only for reading. They added a touch of age and dignity to my rather boyish features. The grey hat compounded the impression.

Folding the coat across my arm, I carried the suitcase out to the station wagon and drove off. I parked the wagon at an all-night gas station a block from Del Wynn's apartment house and gave the attendant a buck, warning him to keep away from the Doberman.

Next, I called a cab. When it came, I gave the driver Wynn's address. Apologizing for the short ride, I handed him the heavy suitcase and a five-dollar bill. He practically drooled all over me.

I saw the unmarked police car in the shadows across from the entrance. I was expecting it. What is more obvious than a couple of men slouched in the front seat of a car a few minutes before midnight? I knew there might be other cars nearby and other men around the building.

The coat over my arm, I climbed from the cab and asked the driver if he would carry my bag to the door of my apartment. After my generosity he could hardly refuse.

As we walked up the steps to the entrance I took a ring of keys from my pocket and examined them casually. Behind me I heard a car door slam and I knew that we were being followed.

Sure enough, as we waited for the self-service elevator, two hefty cool-eyed types joined us. One was older and had a wart on his cheek.

"Evening," I said.

They nodded but did not smile. "Been outta town?" Wartface asked me. He made it sound like a felony.

"New York," I answered. "You like cold, dirt, and noise, I'll sell it to you cheap."

"Yeah," said the cabbie, "know what ya mean. I come from Jersey."

The cops were wooden. "Haven't seen you around," the younger cop said as the elevator arrived and we stepped on. "Must be a new tenant."

"If you haven't seen me around, then you haven't *been* around," I said cheerfully. "I've been up in 4C nearly five years." I thumbed the four button.

"What's your name?" asked Wartface with a lift of his eyebrows.

"Benson. Charlie Benson." There was such a guy, he did live in 4C. I knew he spent the winter in New York and rarely returned until April. He lived across the hall from the Wynns.

"I guess *you* guys are the new tenants," I said with a chuckle as we jolt-stopped and the door flew open.

They didn't answer and I got off, the driver behind me, toting the bag with a grunt, the cops on his heels. We turned a bend in the corridor, all of us. I walked up to 4C and began to fumble with the keys. It was a tight spot and I was worried. The two cops had paused and stood watching a few feet away as the cabbie set my bag by the door.

Stalling, I said to him, "You've been most helpful, my friend, and I'd like to give you a little something extra."

He looked at me in amazement. "Nahh, that's all right, you already—" "No, I insist!"

As I produced my wallet, I glanced up pointedly at the cops. "Did you fellas want something?" I said acidly. "Maybe you'd like to come in and have a drink."

Wartface approached me. He flipped his ID and badge in my face. "Police officers," he said. "Sorry, sir, but we're expecting a bit of trouble and we're checking everyone. We have men covering every possible entrance to the building."

"That's different," I said. "What's it all about?"

"Can't tell you that, sir. But I would suggest that you remain inside your apartment until morning. Good night, sir." He turned and, followed by his partner, went down the hall.

The cabbie was fascinated and wanted to make small-talk about the incident. I let him go on until the cops had time to leave the building. Then I gave him another couple of bucks and I said, "Sounds like there's gonna be shooting 'here. You better scoot outta the area on the double or you might get hurt."

He thanked me and hurried off. When he was out of sight I moved the suitcase across the hall and parked it beside Del Wynn's door. In my

overcoat pocket I had some gadgets to open just about any door lock. Without a sound, I had this one open in less than a minute. It didn't surprise me to find a chain-guard fixed in place. I had a gadget for that too.

Bringing the case and overcoat with me, I slipped inside and closed the door silently. It was a dangerous moment because he might have been watching the door with a gun in his hand. As a matter of fact, he was. The gun wasn't in his hand, however. When I followed the sound of his snores, I found it on a table beside his chair. I stuck it in my pocket.

I glanced around. The drapes were open. I closed them softly. I went back and turned on the lamp by his chair. That didn't faze him in the least, so I shook him gently. His eyes flew open. He stared at me, then reached for the missing gun.

"Hello, Wynn," I said. "Remember me?"

He examined me without a sign of fear. "I don't remember you, but I know you must be Koenig."

I grinned.

"You're making a mistake," he said calmly. "You've made a terrible mistake from the beginning. We would've helped you save the girl if we had known the real situation. It looked like just another drunken brawl."

"I'm touched," I said. But I had a small stab of doubt. I couldn't let him con me, so I began to reach into my pocket.

I saw his hands tighten around the arms of the chair and when he leaped at me, I danced aside. He went sprawling and I gave him a few brutal kicks in the ribs. He groaned, but he was game—and agile. He did a roll, bounced to his feet, and went after me in almost the same motion:

He had a fist like a steel mallet. The first blow cost me three teeth. The second felt as if it had jarred my brain loose from my skull. I knew then that he could finish me in a matter of seconds. So I feinted, then booted him in the groin. When he doubled I reached for the sap in my hip pocket and clubbed him down.

After that, I simply kicked and stomped him to death.

"That's just the way it was," I told his corpse, and went out.

There was a problem: how to leave the building. I was a mess. Blood poured from my mouth and drenched my suit. The swelling at my temple threatened to close one eye. Even unmarked, they would certainly stop me.

I didn't bother with the elevator. I took the stairs, two at a time. I dashed through the lobby and out to the front steps. I stood there, shouting for help. The same two cops raced up to me. I heard the pounding of others coming.

"Upstairs," I said breathlessly, "in 4D. Man beating Del Wynn to death. Tried to stop it, but—"

Wartface gave me a wild-eyed look. "C'mon!" he cried, and a whole flock of cops took off like a covey of frightened birds.

I sat on the steps and mopped my face with a handkerchief. Then I got up and wandered down the street. Around the corner I broke into a run. I slowed at the gas station. Hiding my face, giving the attendant my back, I climbed into the wagon and drove away at a leisurely pace. It was over. I had lived for the one purpose and I was empty. There had been a vague plan to spend the rest of my life hunting down the animals who had done the actual killing, but right then I could not ignite a spark of interest.

As I braked beside what had once been my little "dream" house, I noticed a dim light in the living room. I could not remember leaving a light on, but I had gone out in a rush and it was quite possible. I wasn't disturbed.

I took the Doberman out to the back yard, then entered the house and went to the bathroom where I began to wash and patch my face. As I did this, a feeling of deep melancholy overcame me.

Hate is a kind of companion, and now that the rage was burned out, loneliness swallowed me.

I went toward the bedroom and froze in the doorway. Light from the hall revealed a woman stretched out on my bed. It was a king-sized affair and, curled up, she was lost in the center of it. She was asleep. At the foot of the bed there was a small black suitcase.

I flipped the light switch and abruptly she sat up.

It was Lorrie Proctor!

When I was able to believe it, I became hysterical. I went over and shook her violently by the shoulders.

"How could this happen!" I shouted. "What've you done to me?" I sobbed. "Why, Lorrie? Why, why, why!"

Lorrie Proctor: Carl was even more upset than I had expected, but when I was able to calm him a bit, I gave him the whole sordid story. It all had to do with my former husband, Buzz Proctor, whose name I

continued to use, even after we were divorced. There were certain things I hadn't told Carl about Buzz: that I still had a big secret thing for him; that he was an ex-convict; that he wanted me back and was a violent type who usually took what he wanted.

Since Buzz could turn me on like crazy, I had gone along with him on a lot of borderline schemes. When he asked me to drive and play lookout while he and Rusty McGrath held up a certain bank, though, I said; No thanks—and goodbye! You didn't turn Buzz off that easily, so I had to bide my time and sneak away. I hid out in Vegas while getting a quick divorce which he didn't dare fight because I knew too much about him that I could use in a contest.

I met Carl after I moved to Santa Monica. He was as much in love with me as I was with Buzz. What I felt for Carl was deep and quiet and solid—good for me, but not exciting.

If you skip the hearts and flowers, that brings us to the summer night a week before Carl and I were to be married, the night we parked by the ocean.

Did you guess? Sure, it was Buzz and Rusty McGrath who pulled that sweet little caper. Buzz had been brooding. He wanted me back and he went all out to track me down. I didn't know it was Buzz kidnapping me until I saw him in the light from a passing car. He told me that if I made a fuss, he'd kill Carl on the spot.

I was taken to this old house in the Valley where Rusty's girl, Zelma, was waiting. She shoved me into a room, made me strip and grabbed all my clothing, "So you won't get any ideas about running away." But why did she force me to give her Carl's engagement ring? And what really happened to my pocketbook? She told me it was lost in the scuffle.

Late the next day, Buzz brought me a whole bunch of new clothes and the four of us took off for Mexico. Buzz gave me some ID papers to carry, including a tourist permit, all under the name of Alice Kemp. He said that if I behaved myself, Carl wouldn't get hurt.

We drove all the way to Guadalajara where Buzz rented a big house on the outskirts for a song. In a very short time he managed to turn me on again as if we had never been apart. I could easily have escaped and gone back to Carl, but I was never so happy, especially since Buzz and I were planning to remarry.

One day Buzz got careless and left his desk unlocked. Curious, I explored and found a metal box which contained quite a bit of cash and a

clipping from an L.A. paper. It informed me that *my* body had been found in a shallow grave beside a desert highway. The extreme heat had "accelerated decomposition" and "I" was little more than a skeleton.

That thing in the grave could very well be a girl about my age and size whose name was Alice Kemp. I was carrying her papers and it seemed logical.

In the metal box there was also a policy on my life. I had taken it out while working for an insurance company, making Buzz beneficiary. Apparently Buzz had kept up the premiums in secret. Why? In the beginning did he plan to murder me? Then, for some reason, did he kill Alice Kemp and suddenly decide to use her corpse for my double?

A letter attached to the policy had been forwarded by one of Buzz's cron friends. It stated that the insurance company wasn't going to pay off because, for one thing, the police had not yet made a positive identification of the corpse.

They were trying to locate my dentist so they could check my dental chart. Well, I had fine teeth and never went to a dentist in L.A. Years ago I had gone to a dentist in Philadelphia but he had died, and if my dental chart still existed the police would have a tough time tracing it.

I took some money from the box for a getaway and, while Buzz slept, I escaped on the next plane to L.A. I went to a hotel where I spent hours in my room trying to work up enough courage to get in touch with Carl. Once I had made up my mind, I couldn't find him. He had vanished.

In desperation I went over to "our" little house, the one Carl had leased for us to live in after we were married. I thought maybe someone had moved in there who would have a clue. The house was dark and empty but as I walked around to the back yard I was amazed to find the small green boat Carl had used for fishing set up on blocks; also the doghouse, and the big metal bowl from which he fed the Doberman.

When we rented the place, Carl had decided to keep an emergency key hidden on a hook inside the doghouse. I bent down and searched. The key was there! I opened the front door and went in. When I found Carl's clothes about, I returned to the hotel for my suitcase . . .

I was sure that Carl would forgive me, but as I neared the end of my confession his face became fixed in this odd expression and his eyes were, well, weird. His features were swollen and lopsided from some awful fight which he refused to explain, and I suppose this added to the impression.

I said, "Listen, I'll make it up to you and you'll forget. I know how you must've suffered; but I'm alive and it's as if nothing ever happened. Just a little water over the dam, that's all, darling.

"Ahh, I can see that you're upset and all closed up inside yourself. Well, here, come let me hold you, darling."

I held out my arms and Carl got up and came toward me.

Carl Koenig: I held on to her for a long time—my thumbs pressing, my hands closing tighter—and, when she was long dead, I couldn't seem to let go.

After that I don't remember much. As in a disembodied dream, I was suddenly at the police station and they were putting me in a cell. It took a couple of days, but they recorded the whole thing on tape.

They tell me now that I'm a crazy psychopath and they've got me locked up for life in the state hospital for the criminally insane.

Well, I'm not insane—not in the least! The real nuts are those who kill for no reason at all. What I did was perfectly justified. I simply executed some people who committed the worst possible crime when they murdered poor Lorrie Proctor.

Does that make me insane?



Television Country

by Charlotte Edwards

I'm not asking you to believe it; you understand. In a way, I don't even want you to. You have no idea how lucky you are if you can't believe it.

Harry and I have to believe it. We have to live with it. We try to. Only Harry flies now, traveling the great wide swing of his territory, especially the round trip to Phoenix and Tucson. It gets him home sooner. Besides which, really you know, it's safer.

And anyhow, I'm not much good with Harry away any more. I haven't been for quite awhile. I get nervous and have strange dreams.

Ever since the trip home from Tucson.

We left about two, after Harry had seen his last dealer. We were both pretty quiet, packing things in the company station wagon. We stood for a moment at the door of the cool impersonal room, which we had personalized, and Harry's arm was tight around my waist.

That moment stands very clear and sharp all by itself in my mind. It was the last of something, of completely peaceful sleep perhaps, or of asking questions which always had logical answers, or of trusting the perimeter of the human mind.

As we drove away from the sprawling place, I could hear splashing in the pool. It seemed strange that it would all go on after we were back home.

The car's broad nose turned toward the north and west. Harry's arm lay across the back of the seat and his fingers touched my shoulder lightly.

"We're going back another way," he said. "They say a new piece of freeway has been opened. Used to be rough and very lonely, but I took it because it's a little shorter."

The road laid itself out long and slender, slightly bumpy from heavy truck travel, and we were on our way back to California.

If you have ever stretched out a map of the United States, you know how it is. The Eastern half is pale green and yellow, blackened with the

printing of hundreds of town and city names. About the beginning of Texas in the south and the Dakotas in the north, the color changes, ripens to orange streaked widely with the purple of mountains, and there aren't enough towns to dim the bright shades. Somehow it gives you the feeling of the hot dry country itself.

We weren't ten miles out of Tucson before I felt the map come alive under us, before us, on either side of us. Empty and wide-flung, the desert spread lavishly to rocky hills that weren't quite mountains, that had jagged scalloped tops, that looked two miles away and turned out to be twenty, or forty. The clear pure air distilled the sky with its tatters of silken clouds.

The miles moved sleekly under Harry's good tires. The air conditioning hummed around us. The windows, shut tight, made a compartment as remote from the land as any in a train. Yet, somehow, I was part of it.

Harry didn't talk much, nor did I. It had been a good and perfect thing, this trip together, from the beginning. You see, he travels most of the time. We're not together much, not nearly so much as we would like to be.

Harry and I have a good thing going for us, and have had from the start. We like each other. Every moment shared is precious. But with three teen-aged girls, and his being away so much, those moments squeeze pretty thin sometimes.

So Harry said to me, "Myra, come on, go with me this time. The girls can take care of themselves." He came over and kissed me on the forehead.

You'd think a woman would get used to a little thing like that and not find herself alerted along the nape of her neck, and mush on the edges of her heart.

I looked into his eyes, and they were pleading. He wanted a few days, alone, quiet, with me there to talk it all over with, a swim together, a long slow drink before dinner, dressing up a little and eating at nice places.

Talk about divided loyalties. A woman is like an apple pie. Without supervised cutting, only crumbs are left for the last in the kitchen. Personally, I hide pies and cut Harry's wedge first and biggest. In everything else, though, he seems to get the snips and bits.

When I began to shake my head, he removed his hand and went back to his chair. I didn't like the way his shoulders looked. Not a bit.

Which is how I happened to go with Harry. It took some doing, and Mrs. Mackintosh down the street to supervise, but off we went, me with a white dacron waltz-length gown and matching peignoir the girls gave me for Mother's Day. It's a ridiculously young outfit, but I knew someday I'd feel ruffly enough to wear it. And I did, in Phoenix and Tucson.

I couldn't remember our first honeymoon, by the time the second one was over. But Harry's hand on my arm from time to time made speech unnecessary.

We stopped in a little town called Casa Grande, where Harry always visited a faded cafe for coconut cream pie. Such a pie I shall never taste again, unless we walk into the same restaurant in the same town.

But nothing could force me to do that, of course. Nothing, or nobody or ever.

It was so hot that we were both dappled with moisture when we got back to the car.

"This is the long haul to Yuma," Harry said. The pie and coffee seemed to have restored him. "There's only the next town of Gila Bend, and then it's all empty desert."

I looked around. It was beginning to be just that. "How could they bear it? How did they ever get across down here?"

"That's a good question," Harry agreed.

My gaze went back, hypnotized, to the window. It looked familiar, in patches. Then I realized why.

"This is television country," I cried.

"Indian country," Harry corrected. "Arizona still has more Indians than all the other states together."

He swung his arm toward the bushes that studded the sand. "Mesquite."

"My goodness," I reacted. It was the last phrase I spoke for a long time.

This thing began to happen to me. I began to get the feeling of history underneath me. I felt history and loneliness, panic and terror, courage and grief, spreading out from either side of me. I looked up at the sun, which defied the spattered clouds. I thought of how quickly my arms and legs had turned red, then brown, in five short days. I thought of five days on the desert instead of our ten air-conditioned hours. I watched the forests of tall cactus, weirdly shaped, like one long pointing finger surrounded by a clenched fist. I watched the strange hard mountains in the

distance, and counted up their infinite layers of rock and shale as the road wound through the nearer hills. I shivered and was suddenly giddy.

"I can turn this down if it's too cold." Harry reached toward the air button.

I shook my head. Quite suddenly the narrow road divided, grew broad, and became a freeway. The car purred with pleasure and Harry said, "Ah, that's better."

We went through the little town of Gila Bend on a breath. The houses, stores, all except the gas stations, were dun and washed out, dried like bones.

Then we were alone again, Harry and Myra, alone as we hadn't been even in the motel. Alone in a sort of backward immortality, as if we were once again in the age of our ancestors, who came this way and made a place for us in California. I wished that I had asked my grandmother more questions about her parents. Or that somebody had written it all down in the family Bible.

"The thing you have to be careful of," Harry volunteered cheerfully after a long silence, "is that they mean what they say on those 'Soft Shoulders, Sand' signs. You see, if you get off the rim of the road, two things can happen. Either the sand catches your wheels and you roll over and over in the mesquite—"

"Harry, really," I protested.

"Well," he argued defensively, "it's so. Or else it throws you out of control and you go skidding across the freeway and smack into a car coming the other way."

There weren't, I realized, many cars coming the other way. Harry was right. This was a very lonely way home. "I'm not going to get a night's sleep when you're gone from now on," I said lightly.

As they say in old-fashioned books, little did I know.

He laughed. "Forewarned is forearmed, honey," he comforted. "See, I stay in the fast lane. Only one kind of soft shoulders I'm not afraid of." He patted them.

"It would be awful just to get stuck," I volunteered moodily.

We had stayed at the motel until the last minute of the sign-out time. Now it was beginning to get dusky around us. Not a fast dusk, laying itself smooth in purple, just a haze, like fog, beginning at the very top of the farthest hills and letting itself down carefully, an inch at a time, toward the earth.

My eyes were on the sky one moment, then on the road the next. "Harry," I screamed, "look out!"

Harry's arm was off the back of the seat, his two hands were struggling with the wheel, his leg was a slamming force against his ankle and foot on the brake. The screech seemed to fill the world. The woven rubber feeling of the car was fluid and sickening.

We careened from the fast lane into a semi-circle, careened back from the center, wheels grinding on the right side in the sand of the soft shoulder of the road.

I waited in utter calmness for us to roll over and over into the mesquite. But we didn't. Harry had managed to stop the car.

His anger was louder than the air conditioner. "What the hell," he yelled, "did you scream like that for?"

"You almost hit him," I cried. "The old man in the middle of the road. You were headed right for him."

"What old man? I didn't see any old man." Harry opened the door on his side and stepped out. He peered back down the road. "I don't see any old man," he insisted.

He stomped around the car. The right rear wheel was deep in the sand. I knew it before he called the knowledge to me, unbalanced as we were.

I jumped out, glanced quickly both ways, and ran back down the empty road to the old man. He stood there, not two feet from where I had first seen him. He looked dazed and worried, as well he might after such a close call.

"Thank God we missed you," I threw at him, running, getting to him, trying to see if he was hurt in any way.

He swung around to stare toward me. I stopped short, aware of the late afternoon heat which somehow seemed to have gotten into my heart and had set it steaming and bubbling like a kettle.

It was television country, all right, I thought distractedly, and this old boy was right out of the small screen in the living room. A thick patina of sandy dust lay all over him. Under it I made out an old flat hat, rags of brown clothes, a bag on his shoulder on which was hitched a heavy pick and shovel. I peered closer, ignoring my heart, ready to yell for Harry, and looked at his face.

Did I say the houses of Gila Bend were dun and dried bones? I knew nothing. This old face was dun and dried bones, with a skimpy white

beard too tired to fly in any wind. Buried somewhere under the shadow of the hat brim, under the dirt and sharp eyebrows, were old eyes I could only sense, and weariness which came out from them in waves.

"You must be almost in shock," I found myself saying. "Come along with me. The car is cool. And we have some ginger ale. Sit awhile, until my husband digs us out, and then we can take you where you're going."

"You headed for Mexico?" His voice was faint in the stillness, far away, as weary as his eyes.

"No," I said. I remembered that Harry had told me that to our left, the south, it wasn't far to the border, and that up ahead there was a turn, beyond Yuma, at Calexico, where you could almost step across the line.

Harry called, his voice sharp in all the sudden silence, loud in contrast to the old man's. "Hey, Myra, give me a hand! Myra!"

He was bent over the back fender, pushing against the heavy resisting sand. I knew, somehow, that he hadn't seen me leave the car, that he thought I was still in there, air-conditioned and waiting.

I reached one hand toward the old man. "Come on," I coaxed softly, the way I used to handle the middle girl, the shy one. "Come on and get cool, and have something to drink."

He moved with a dry shuffle, as if all the juice were out of his joints, and very very slowly. I matched my steps to his, a little ahead of him, my eyes on the road to see that tragedy didn't come roaring at us, as it so nearly had.

We were beside the car when Harry looked up. "Isn't it enough," he said fiercely, "that you go suddenly berserk and get us into this fix without—" He looked beyond me. His mouth and cheeks and eyebrows went lax all in one movement. "For the love of God," he whispered.

"He was there, you see, Harry," I said with pure reason. "You must have been blinded by the sun, or looking off at an angle—because there he was, Harry, right in the middle of the freeway—" It hit me, the enormity of it. I shivered a little.

"You can use my shovel," the dry old voice walked its great distance, "if'n you want. But not my pick. I gotta use my pick when I find my water hole." He reached creakily back to his pack. He put two thin-veined hands around the handle. The skin of his wrists was etched deep on the bones, burned red as blood. He pulled the shovel free, and heaved it, missing Harry by inches.

"Hey!" Harry cried. Some of the color came back into his face.

The old man wasn't looking at Harry. He stared at the car. He shook his head and closed his eyes and opened them again. "Still there," he muttered.

I opened the back door. "Get in," I offered. "Rest a little."

He backed away from me. He shook his head fiercely. "Not me. If'n you'll just finish with my shovel. I got to find my water hole. I been lookin' and lookin'. It's gotta be here. It should be here. I can't rest easy till I find my water hole."

Harry said sharply, "Myra, get in the car."

I stared at him.

"Do as I tell you," he commanded. Any authority he'd shown was minor compared to his total maleness. "Shut the door and lock it. Lock all of them."

I went close to him. "He's just a tired old man, Harry," I whispered. "He must have walked miles. We haven't passed a town in hours. He's a—a prospector or something—" It sounded as if I were begging.

Harry said, "Get—in—the—car!"

He began to dig rapidly. I minded him. Like one of the girls, having to take an order without explanation, I obeyed my husband. But once inside, I reached for a bottle of ginger ale and the opener, then I ran down the window and held the foaming stuff toward the old man.

"Myra," Harry called warningly. His shovel moved with deep precision, loud and scratching, fast, straining, racing to the finish.

The old man hesitated, then he moved in that strange bony way toward me. I held the bottle out as far as I could, so that he wouldn't have to touch me.

He took it. He put it to his cracked lips. His Adam's apple raised and dropped twice. Then he spat the fizzy stuff, away from me, toward the highway, lifted the bottle high and threw it with a crash to the nice new freeway pavement.

"Cahh," he choked.

I pulled myself back into the car.

"I gotta find my water hole," he muttered, making a sing-song affair of it now. "I can't rest easy till I find my water hole. All them years, baking, baking, stone ovens, baking; no water like my water hole, can't rest easy."

Harry came around the side of the car. He was soaked and patched with sweat, and the shovel swung heavy in his hand.

"Here we are, Old Timer," he cried. It sounded like TV again. But there was something false and too hearty in Harry's voice, something strange and young and frightened. "Thanks. Those pebbles ought to do it." He paused. "No water holes around here," he added.

The old man took his time about reaching for the shovel and fastening it back in place. "Lot you'd know," he breathed thinly.

Harry pulled a handkerchief, very white in the slow-pushed dusk, from his back pocket and worked it over his soiled and perspiring face. "Where you from?" he asked the old man.

We both saw it, I know we did. The shadowed eyes pinched and turned sly. "Ain't from Yuma," the voice was defiant. "Ain't never been to Yuma. Never. Whole life."

"We're going that way," Harry said. I knew it was against his will and better judgment. I knew it was his good heart, and his feeling of guilt for not seeing the old man in the first place. "Thanks for your shovel, we're ready to head on. Want a lift?"

It happened then. The old man stood a foot taller, his eyes went wild with fear and rage. His thin hands knotted into fists, and the burned wrists were livid. His mouth turned to a grey vacancy.

"No, you don't," he shrilled, high, like an animal. "You don't get me back there again. Not you nor no man's army. Yuma." The word came out like spit in the air. "I gotta find my water hole. My own good pure water from my own water hole. Nobody's goin' to shut me up in that filth again. Them caves. Bake ovens. I dreamed my water hole. I can't rest easy until—you don't get me back there. Not ever."

He reached upward, strong and strangely young. The pick was in his hand with the suddenness of a quick drawn gun. "Now git," he shouted: "Git, both of you, whoever you are and wherever you're from. Leave me be to find my water hole or I'll rip you into long strips of meat."

Harry was in the car before I could open my mouth to scream. The motor turned at once, praise new cars. The rear wheel slashed a few empty rounds, then took hold. We skidded out onto the pavement.

Not so fast, though, that we couldn't hear the harsh clank of the pick against the left back fender, and the harsh uplifted shriek of the old man.

"I can't rest easy," he ranted. "I can't rest easy."

I heard him twice, somewhere in the midst of my shuddering, before the sound of the motor and the blessed hum of the air conditioner drowned him from my ears.

Harry's hands on the wheel were shaking. "Crazy old coot," he muttered. "Nutty old fool. Walking the freeways looking for water."

I started to cry. I cried for quite awhile and Harry didn't say a word to stop me. If he'd been a woman I'm sure he would have done the same thing, instead of just drawing long breaths on his cigarette and swearing under them.

When we neared Yuma, Harry spoke for the first time. "There's a sign on the edge of town I've noticed before." He sounded calm and himself again. "It points the way to the Territorial Prison. I think we'd just better stop off there and tell the authorities about that guy."

"You think he was an escaped prisoner?" I asked. Crazy, yes. Driven mad from the sun, I'd thought. But a prisoner?

Harry nodded. "Add it up."

We rode in silence, following the green sign. We went through streets which were just turning on lights in the brown twilight. We swung to a dead end, and crossed a series of railroad tracks. We lifted up a sharp hill and around a curve.

Yuma Territorial Prison was spread out before us at the top of the hill.

It was our fault, of course, for not knowing more about Arizona history. California, sure. But not Arizona.

Yuma Territorial Prison—and Museum! 1825.

Adobe, old rocks, broken-down walls. Sun-burned brick. Crumbling. Hanging on. It was every television Western, every sheriff who fought to get the prisoner to the Territorial Prison before a gang could lynch him.

Tragic. Horrible. Man's inhumanity to man. The tiny dug-out cells, chipped from the heavy rock hill. Great rusted crossed bars before them. Great rusted rings to manacle men, set in the center of them.

"Caves," the old man had cried. "Filth. Ovens," he had shrilled with those blood-red wrists raised high.

I was ill. I was very ill.

Suddenly and completely all history was in me. The place where I stood, the old yard, dirt packed to stone by other feet, the yard where a hundred years ago men took their pathetic limited exercise and yearned out over the green country. Because it was green, even in the twilight, the land below was rich and green, watered by the silver thread of the Colorado River. History climbed up into my legs and feebled them, and

went on into my stomach and nauseated it, and caught my heart and squeezed it dry.

It was the same with Harry. We stood there, the two of us, Myra and Harry on a second honeymoon, and for a long time we were too weak to walk back to the car. We were too gone in the past to think of the old man.

It was only when we were once again down the hill, moving very slowly because the steering wheel looked big and dangerous in Harry's trembling hands, once more across the railroad tracks, that we thought of him and looked at each other.

You have to be married quite awhile to share a strong thought, a question, an answer, and agree without words, the way we did. Harry picked up speed, swung the car out of Yuma, and began to retrace the distance back to the spot where the old man had been so shockingly and suddenly in the middle of the freeway.

It turned dark all at once, as if somebody had snapped a switch off in a bright room. I suppose there were stars, but we didn't see them. Perhaps there was a moon, but it gave us no light. All we saw, the two of us, straining our eyes, was the road, black and wide, in the modern beam of our headlights, unreeling like film, roll after roll of it, black, shiny, full of miles.

"We have to find out," Harry said, some time, any time, a long time. "We have to try to find him."

"Yes," I breathed. "Yes."

I don't remember how long it was. Years of night and road and the motor all seemed to push against dead air. We slowed at last, caught by the familiar shape of a hill, the one beside which the car had skidded and lashed into the sand.

We slowed for another reason too.

On the opposite side of the freeway red and white blinker lights flashed in crazy syncopation. As we drew closer, going very gently now, we saw yellow barricades, thrown up rapidly, haphazard. A spotlighted sign read SLOW—DETOUR.

Harry parked at the side of the road, careful to stay off the sand, yet give maximum passing space. He kept the lights on. He opened the door and signaled me out. He took my hand. We ran across the road, across the narrow center divider and to the detour sign, the busy reflectors flashing their warning.

There was a police car at the far side. The officer called, "What do you want?"

I could almost hear Harry swallow. "The old man," he cried thickly. "Was he hit? What happened here?"

The officer came into the aura of the reflectors, his face mottled a flashing red and white. "Don't know anything about any old man. Damnedest thing, though. Look at it and see for yourselves."

The barricades were a neat fence, framing a large chipped hole in the freeway. The hole wasn't neat, though. It was ragged, as though it had been worked at in frenzied haste. It gaped in the nice new pavement like a great tear in the seat of a new pair of pants.

And filling it, brimming it, cupping it, shimmering in the red and white lights, was a clear shining pool of water!

We turned, not caring what the officer thought. We ran, still hand in hand, two utterly terrified children in a night too big and dark for us, a land too spread and wild. We ran toward the security of our modern, sensible, air-conditioned, motorized world.

Just before we reached the car, Harry stumbled, fell to one knee, caught himself, and came up with something in his hand.

It was a pick, ancient and rusty and very efficient. It was damp on the edges from water finally discovered.

After how many years? Oh heaven, after how long a time?

"I can't rest until I find my water hole."

Harry's arm stretched high and frantic. He threw the pick with all of his strength toward the unseen mesquite bushes.

"I can't rest until I find my water hole."

All right, as I said before, you don't have to believe it. You're lucky if you can't.

Maybe Harry and I would be lucky too, in time. They say all experiences dim, and a sensible explanation can be made for almost anything.

But we have to live with it.

You see, the best mechanics in town, or in the city, cannot seem to straighten out the sharp narrow gouge in the center of the left rear fender of Harry's company station wagon.

Art for Money's Sake

by Dan J. Marlowe

MY name is Carl Widner. I have none of the characteristics people usually associate with men of daring. I'm balding, pink-cheeked, far too short, and on the wrong side of sixty. On the other hand, I'm a chain-smoker who is loaded with nervous energy, I drive a bright red sportscar, I'm a *young* sixty-four, and I know I'm considered something of an eccentric by my associates at the museum.

I have a background in daring too. All my life I've been reading mystery stories and planning perfect crimes. What began as an intellectual exercise prepared me for reality. Spurred to action by circumstances, I had just such a plan in operation.

It was really very shortsighted of the museum trustees. After a hundred years of laissez-faire operation in regard to employees' retirement ages, they suddenly decided to invoke a mandatory retirement-at-sixty-five clause. The word reached me eventually in the restoring and retouching section which I had headed for fifteen years. At the moment my total worldly assets approximated \$900 plus my car. Since my combined museum pension and social security would barely keep me in the quantities of unfiltered cigarettes to which I was accustomed, the precipitous action of the museum board left me no alternative but to feather my nest against my fast approaching involuntary retirement.

I borrowed \$2,000 that afternoon and wrote an airmail letter that night. I enclosed the \$2,000 in the form of a bank draft. Three weeks later I received a notice from the air express office at the local airport that they were holding a package for me.

I drove to the airport, weaving in and out of traffic. Upon the occasion of one of his infrequent rides with me, my young assistant, Henry Sansom, remarked in an awed tone: "Mr. Widner, you really *use* a car!"

I skidded to a stop in the NO PARKING zone at the airport terminal building. There were several signs with arrows pointing toward the lo-

cation of airport facilities. I climbed from the car and followed the set of arrows marked AIR EXPRESS.

Five minutes later I returned to the car carrying a large, flat crate. The policeman must have arrived a couple of minutes sooner. He gave me an impersonal glance as I placed the crate on the passenger's-side bucket seat and then got into the car. He continued to write in his summons book as he stood with one foot on my rear bumper. It irked me that this crass arbiter of automotive injustice seemed determined to ignore me personally.

When he bent to get the license number, I gunned the car forward. The bumper was yanked from under his foot as I pulled into the moving traffic stream. The discomfited minion of the law was still rolling on his back in the dust when the airport disappeared from my rear-view mirror.

Twenty minutes later I parked outside my studio apartment. I'm fond of the place. It has one large room with a skylight, and the walls of the room are covered with my paintings. I'd prefer to have the walls bare and the paintings sold, but I've become reconciled to the fact that we live in an imperfect world.

The apartment also has a small bedroom, a bath, and a kitchenette. A cleaning woman takes care of those three rooms for me, but I don't permit her to touch anything in the studio. The floor is littered with cigarette butts and the twisted remains of paint tubes. There is no order in the haphazard placement of cabinets, easels, drawing tables, and paint boxes. The entire atmosphere, in fact, is perfect for the creation of rare and original works of art.

The critics are all agreed, unfortunately, that I have never created anything that was rare, original, or a work of art. Their attitude and their aspersions are all the more dastardly when it's considered that never once have I asked for their opinions. Almost as much as the museum board, the critics were responsible for forcing me into my chosen course of action.

Have you ever heard of Hans van Meegeren? Quite simply, he was a genius, the world's greatest art forger. He created Vermeers so perfect that even Jan Vermeer would have thought they were his own. And van Meegeren's deceptions might never have been detected at all if he hadn't confessed due to a bizarre combination of circumstances.

At the end of World War II, van Meegeren was put on trial by the Dutch for selling national art treasures to the Nazis. The only way he

could hope to avoid a prison sentence was to admit that he'd painted the "masterpieces" himself. He wasn't believed, of course. The critics and experts had all certified his paintings as genuine Vermeers. To prove his point, he created another Vermeer in his jail cell, and the experts all had to admit that they'd been wrong.

Van Meegeren's story always appealed to me because he showed up the critics from whom he'd suffered just as I had. His first forgery was begun for no other reason than to fool them. A profit motive was soon involved, however. In all, van Meegeren created six false Vermeers which he sold for a total of \$3,200,000. One might be able to find fault with his ethics but never with his arithmetic.

If you're not an artist yourself, you can't possibly imagine the knowledge, skill, and patience the man needed to bring off his coup. Each new painting had to be the equal of a genuine Vermeer. It had to be consistent with the master's known works. It had to be a subject which Vermeer himself might have selected. The color, the perspective, and the style of execution all had to be as technically perfect as a genuine Vermeer.

But that's not the half of it. In addition to making Vermeer the subject of years of intensive study, van Meegeren had other difficulties to overcome. A painting is made up of four layers: the support, usually canvas or wood; the painting ground, the prepared surface upon which the picture is painted; the paint itself, made from particles of colored pigment suspended in a medium such as linseed oil; and finally a film of varnish to give brilliance to the colors and to act as a protective covering.

A forger not only must be a fine artist, he must choose his materials with care. A modern canvas would never pass for a canvas 200 years old. The modern weave is too uniform, obviously the product of a superior technology. A forger must also know what pigments were used by the artist he's imitating, because many of the pigments in use today are comparatively recent discoveries.

A forger must know, for instance, that Renaissance painters used ultramarine for the blue in their canvases; the Prussian blue wasn't discovered until 1704; that cobalt blue first appeared in 1802; and that synthetic ultramarine, first used in 1824, is distinguishable from the natural product because it lacks impurities and its particles are all the same size.

A forger must have similar knowledge of all other color pigments. He must be careful to use nothing that will date his work earlier than he

intends. A simple error like using a modern brush made from hog bristles instead of a period-piece brush made from badger hair can destroy the illusion of authenticity. If brush bristles are discovered in a painting, they had better be the right kind.

Although I didn't plan to forge a Vermeer, I did plan to employ many of van Meegeren's tested techniques. Before I was finished, I expected to have enough money to end my days on the French Riviera, surrounded by beautiful, bikini-clad mermaids. When I dream, you understand, I really dream.

In the studio I found a claw hammer and pulled the nails from one end of the crate I'd brought from the airport. Out came the most expensive piece of trash I'd ever owned. It was a painting by Albretti, a Renaissance artist so minor that few people have ever heard of him. I'd gone \$2,000 in debt to purchase the painting from a private collection.

What I planned to do was produce a Delgardi, and my newly acquired canvas had been painted in Delgardi's own studio. Albretti had been one of Delgardi's least accomplished students, but the materials he used were identical with those employed by the master. As soon as I made up my mind to paint a Delgardi, I knew this was the type of support I had to have.

Van Meegeren again had pointed the way for me. Knowing that old wood or canvas can't be faked successfully, he bought old paintings of minor artists of the proper time period, removed their work, and substituted his own: He once paid \$400 for a painting just for its support and later sold the "Vermeer" he created upon it for \$700,000.

I began the tedious task of carefully removing the varnish and the paint of Albretti's work. The next day I stayed in the museum until long after closing. When I was sure I was alone, I took several color photos of the museum's most recent acquisition, a Delgardi madonna that had been in the private collection of a Spanish family for centuries. The museum had acquired it at auction in Sotheby's London showroom. I examined the painting in detail, and was delighted to find that the support for the Delgardi was in every way identical to the support I was salvaging from the Albretti. So far, so good.

I'm not stupid. I knew I couldn't hope to create a painting that would be accepted as a long-lost Delgardi. I didn't know enough about the master's style and technique to create something totally new as van Meegeren had done with his Vermeers. The years I'd spent restoring and

retouching old masters, however, more than qualified me to copy any existing Delgardi.

By the time the photo lab delivered my color enlargements of the Delgardi madonna, I had removed all traces of the Albretti from my support and had collected pigments and brushes of the proper period. I got right to work then duplicating the Delgardi masterpiece.

My plan was simplicity itself. First I would duplicate the museum's painting, then I would remove the original from the museum and leave the copy in its place. Next I would announce that while trying to restore my Albretti I had discovered another painting underneath, identical to the one on display in the museum. After that it would be up to the experts to decide which was the genuine Delgardi and which was the work of a copyist.

Just to make sure there could be no mistake, I used a little cobalt blue on a couple of spots to give my copied Delgardi a date too late for the original. This would show the experts beyond a shadow of a doubt that the copy hanging in the museum was indeed a copy.

I couldn't afford to be in a hurry. I allowed the painting to age for a few months, then brushed on a coat of special varnish. The next-to-final step was to place the canvas in an oven and bake it delicately until a network of fine cracks spread over its entire surface. I sprayed it then with a thin coating of ancient grime I'd scraped from my original Albretti.

I had a key to the museum because I often worked weekends. That same night I let myself into the museum and turned off the alarms guarding the collections of old masters. I substituted my copy for the original Delgardi and made my departure after the closest inspection showing the paintings to be presumably identical. Back in my apartment I gloated for most of the balance of the night over my "copy."

In the morning I called on the curator and told him about my fantastic discovery. He telephoned the chairman of the museum board, and the excitement began. No one doubted for an instant that the Delgardi madonna in the museum display case was the same one that had always been there. The only question to be resolved was which painting was authentic. I was glad I'd had the foresight to put the two spots of cobalt blue on the forgery, because I didn't have much faith that the experts would come up with the right answer unless there was an obvious flaw.

They used x rays, alcohol tests, spectroscopic analyses, and a few tests unknown to me. It took several weeks, but no one hurries where a half-

million-dollar painting is concerned. Then one Saturday afternoon, as I was lounging in the apartment, reading a travel brochure about the Riviera, I received a phone call from the curator. It was the unanimous opinion of the experts that the painting on display in the museum was the genuine one.

I was staggered. "Are you sure?" I asked.

"We're certain. There's no doubt at all. We even found traces of cobalt blue on the museum's Delgardi."

"But doesn't that *prove* it's a copy?" I argued. "Cobalt blue wasn't discovered until the early 1800's." It annoyed me that I had to do their thinking for them too:

"On the contrary. It proves the painting's age. You understand that if a copy was made from your painting, it would have had to be done hundreds of years ago, before Albretti covered it. Besides, anyone able to duplicate a Delgardi would know enough to use the proper pigments. Everyone knows how recent cobalt blue is. The cobalt blue that was used undoubtedly occurred when the painting required retouching, perhaps 150 years ago. An artist doing retouching, as you very well know, Carl, is concerned with color and effect, not in using pigments identical to those of the original painter."

I stared at the far wall. "Then what about *my* painting?" I asked finally.

"A copy. It wasn't uncommon for students to duplicate the works of their teacher, including the signature. Yours is most likely the work of Albretti. It's an uncommonly fine job, everyone agrees, but then, you see, he painted over it. We can't imagine any artist covering such fine work unless he knew it was a copy and placed more value upon the original work he planned to put over it."

The infuriating part of it was that their logic made a certain weird sense. Or could it be that I was the victim of the experts' commercialism rather than their stupidity? After all, the museum had half a million tied up in the painting on their wall.

I paced the room while I tried to think. I now owned a "copy" of a Delgardi by Albretti instead of a mediocre Albretti original. The "copy" was worth more than the original, but hardly enough to pay my debts and transport me to a lifetime of ease on the French Riviera.

The irony of it struck me afresh. That was *my* work hanging in the museum. I had fooled all the experts, or so they were prepared to swear. Hundreds of people would stop in front of the Delgardi in the museum

every day and admire the skill of the artist, who was me. Art magazines would publish articles praising the painting. And it would all be for my work. It was exactly what I'd always dreamed of during those scarifying moments while reading the critics' cutting reviews of my work.

Wasn't that better than going to the Riviera?

Of course it was.

I might not be able to retire to a life of leisure, but after all, when a man passes sixty, bikini-clad mermaids present a problem not even van Meegeren could solve.



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**TO: ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE
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A Sound Investment

by James M. Ullman

As Joey walked by, the woman poked her head from a parked car and said "Hey, Marco."

Puzzled, Joey turned. He was a thin, bony-shouldered youth, garbed in work pants and a sport shirt.

"You're the Marco boy, aren't you?" she went on. "Joey Marco?"

"That's me." He came closer.

The woman, a brunette, had heavy-lidded eyes, full lips, and a slightly receding chin. She was about thirty, and wore a filmy, low-cut summer dress. "You interested in part-time work?" she asked. "Good pay? Short hours?"

"That depends," he said cautiously.

"Well, get in," she ordered. "I don't wanna discuss it on the street." She added, "I'm Helene."

She slid behind the wheel. Joey climbed into the car. As she put her foot on the gas pedal and turned the ignition key, her skirt hiked up. Joey stared at her legs.

"What's the matter?" she asked casually. "Never seen a grown-up woman before?"

"Sorry," he smiled, "but you can't blame a guy for admiring. How come you know me?"

"I been checking around," she replied vaguely, and wheeled the car into traffic with surprising ease.

Joey had never seen a woman drive so well. She knew the car's clearances to a fraction of an inch, slipping unhesitatingly through spaces where Joey was sure the car wouldn't pass. "You drive good," he observed.

"It's my specialty," she answered, eyes on the road. "I hear yours used to be running, before you got caught in a holdup and they sent you away."

"That's right. I was a dash man. City high champ."

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-two."

"Think you can still run?"

"Sure."

"We'll see." The car swung around a corner and onto a boulevard that cut through a city park.

"I think you're nuts," Joey said matter-of-factly. "Why don't you let me out here?"

"Because I think you'll want the job. Oh, I know how it is. You're an ex-con. You can't get regular work, so you pick up a tough buck an hour now and then, tossing bundles around or delivering handbills. And maybe at night you roll drunks or knock off a delicatessen."

"Just a minute—"

"You didn't think I was talking about honest work, did you? If you did, I'll drive you home."

Joey said nothing.

Silently, she drove to a part of the city he didn't know, parked on a business street in a decaying residential neighborhood, then led him into a dusty secondhand store. A sign in the window proclaimed KRUEGER FURNITURE. No customers were in sight. Looking at the junk strewn about, Joey could figure why.

Helene walked through the store and opened a door which apparently led to living quarters in the back. "Hey, Carl," she yelled.

"Right there," a man hollered back.

Helene strolled to an old chair and sat down. "Make yourself comfortable," she invited. She crossed her legs and lit a cigarette. Joey couldn't take his eyes from her and she didn't seem to mind.

A man limped into the room from the back, supporting himself with a cane. Joey judged him to be about forty-five. He was of medium height, with red hair and broad shoulders, a thick chest and a very slim middle. His flat nose had been broken once. His chin was square and his eyes, shielded by steel-rimmed glasses, were alert and unblinking.

"This," Helene said, "is my husband, Carl Krueger."

"And you," Krueger said, "must be Joey Marco. Can you still run?" Joey nodded.

"That's good." Krueger waved his cane. "Sit down, Joey. I don't think any customers will disturb us."

Joey sat on a sofa, eyeing Krueger warily. Krueger limped over and sat beside him.

"I heard of you," Krueger explained, "from a friend who watched you in a prison baseball game. He said you were the fastest man he'd ever seen. And that's what I want; a fast young man."

"Get to the point," Joey said nervously.

"Sure. You know the telephone holdup gag?"

"The through-the-window bit?"

"Right. At night someone calls up a clerk in a store with a big plate glass window facing the street. The caller tells the clerk a high-powered rifle is trained right on her from out in the dark somewhere, and if she makes a wrong move she'll be killed. She's ordered to take the money from the register, put it in a bag, and throw it out the door. The clerk usually does just that, even though the stunt is a bluff."

"Is that why you want a runner? To pick up the bag?"

"Exactly."

Joey shrugged. "I dunno: Is it worth the effort? How much can you get from an old lady tending a register in a lousy shop? Fifty, sixty bucks, maybe. To make it pay, you'd have to pull the stunt every night, and if you did that, everyone in town would get wise."

"That's true," Krueger said, "but I plan to try for big scores only. Pick a job where the potential payoff is high; pick a victim known to be timid enough to fall for the bluff. Pull a successful job only every few months or so."

"Where'll you find jobs like that? They don't grow on trees."

Krueger grinned. "I have contacts who'll find 'em for a percentage. I'll make the phone calls. You scoop up the money and Helene will drive your getaway car. It's almost risk-proof. If the victim puts the money out, we score. If she doesn't, you and Helene will be out of the neighborhood before the cops show."

"If the victim doesn't cooperate," Joey pointed out, "there's no payoff."

Krueger nodded. "I don't expect we'll bat a thousand. We'll have some failures. But crime's a business to me, Joey. It took me half a lifetime in prison to figure that out, so now I'm businesslike. Here's my deal. I'll put you on retainer. I'll mail you forty bucks cash, each and every week. That should pay your room rent and give you enough, plus what you earn on your own, to get by between jobs. You got to earn something honest

on your own because you need the front. That's why I bought this junk furniture store. I learned upholstering and woodworking in prison shops and now, if the cops come around and ask, I got an honest business."

"What's my split on a score?"

"Twenty-five per cent."

"That's not much."

"It's a lot, considering I'll pay you about two thousand bucks a year just to be on hand the few times I need you, and considering Helene's entitled to a share in each job. Nobody can handle a car as good as she can."

Joey shook his head. "It's the screwiest thing I ever heard of."

"When you get older," Krueger said, "you'll hear of things even screwier. You're lucky. You're getting a chance to see how professionals operate before they put you away for so long the knowledge won't do you any good. By the way, when we make a good score, I'd advise you to put your share into safekeeping. Don't spend it recklessly. Build a nest egg. For one thing, if you're arrested you'll be able to hire a good lawyer."

"Look, dad, you can tell me how to pull a job, but what I do with my money is my business. Confidentially, when we score I plan to celebrate, in a very big way. O.K.?"

Krueger smiled. "O.K. If that's how you want it."

On each of the next three Fridays, Joey received forty dollars in cash in the mail. It was enough to permit him to get by with just a minimum of part-time work.

Then, on a Monday, an unsigned note ordered him to be at the northwest corner of Clay and Jackson at nine the next morning.

Helene picked him up there at nine A.M. precisely. It was going to be a scorcher, with temperatures predicted in the nineties. She wore a snug blouse and form-fitting pink stretch pants.

After they drove a few minutes, Joey said, "This isn't the way to the furniture store."

"We're not going there." Helene offered no further explanation, so Joey settled back and lit a cigarette, studying her.

"You mind," he said finally, "if I say something personal? You're a beautiful woman. A beautiful *young* woman, even if you are a few years older than me. Not that those few years make any difference."

The expression on her face was enigmatic, but her lips curled in a hint of a smile. "So?"

"Your husband, Carl, is a little old for you, isn't he?"

"Don't underestimate him. He's a smart man."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant. You kids, you're all the same." She said it gently though. "Look, Joey. You seem to be a nice boy, much nicer than the people Carl usually deals with. If I begin to like you a little, don't let it go to your head: Carl's still my husband."

"That's important?"

"Like I told you," Helene repeated, "he's smart, and there comes a time when that means something to a woman. Carl makes lots of money. He's got other people on his payroll, people with other specialties. There's a man named Harry, who can practically climb walls. And Floyd—well, never mind what Floyd does."

"How'd you get mixed up with Carl in the first place?"

"He and my father were cellmates. When my father died in prison, Carl and I were his only mourners. I had it pretty tough as a kid, and when Carl got out he promised to take care of me for the rest of my life."

Helene made a few more turns, then parked in front of a variety store. Carl Krueger limped toward them, opened the rear door, and flopped onto the back seat.

He got right to the point. "Helene brought you here so you could see our target in daylight."

"We're taking the variety store?"

"No. The supermarket across the street."

Joey turned. It was an independently owned store, fairly large, but not as large as those in supermarket chains.

"The cashier's cage," Krueger went on, "is to the right, well away from the checkout counters. Friday nights, the cashier has a lot of money for cashing paychecks. The regular cashier just quit. The temporary one is a nervous old woman, a Mrs. Walters, the type most likely to fall for the telephone gag. The store closes at nine P.M., so at 8:30 Friday, Joey, you go into the phone booth in the corner drugstore. From the booth, you can see most of the store's interior. As soon as Mrs. Walters is alone, phone me at the number I'll give you, a phone booth miles from here. Let the phone ring six times, then hang up. If there are people near the

cashier, don't ring me. If I don't hear from you by 8:50, we'll postpone the job for a week."

"And after I ring you six times?"

"I'll phone the supermarket and ask for Mrs. Walters. I'll tell her I'm watching from an office across the street; that I have a confederate, an expert marksman, with a rifle trained on her, and she'll be killed if she doesn't follow instructions. She's to fill a shopping bag with currency. Then she's to carry the bag outside, put it down, return to the cage, and keep her back to the street for five minutes."

"While she's doing that, where am I supposed to be?"

"You'll leave the drugstore, stroll toward the supermarket, and stand outside the window. You'll be watching Mrs. Walters every second, and if she hangs up on me or signals for help, keep on walking to the corner and turn right. Helene will be in a car parked a half-block down that street. But if Mrs. Walters puts the money out, you walk over, pick it up, then walk away. Don't run unless necessary. The fewer people who notice you, the better."

"I think I've got it."

"Good. Now get out and spend the rest of the morning exploring the block. Helene will drive me back to the furniture store and return here at noon. When she does, show her all the places where you might turn up if your planned route to the car is barred. Get to know every gangway, every backyard fence, every potential escape route as well as any kid in the neighborhood knows them. I won't see you again until the job's over, one way or another, Friday night."

Helene returned for Joey exactly as scheduled. Krueger ran a businesslike operation, all right. They circled the block, Joey pointed out the routes he might use if he ran into trouble, and then Helene said, "I'm with it; so now I'll take you home."

"What's your hurry?"

"You got something else in mind?"

"Let's go back to the park," he suggested. "It's a hot day. We'll sit in the shade, drink cold beer, eat a few sandwiches, and watch the world go by."

"You're sure it's the world you'll watch?"

"With that outfit you're wearing," he admitted, "I guess you know what I'll be watching."

She laughed. "You're persistent, aren't you?" There was a liquor store ahead, and she parked in front of it. "O.K. Carl's not expecting me for lunch, and I haven't been on a picnic in centuries. Get the beer, I'll buy us some grub."

They found a secluded spot on the bank of a lagoon, where Joey spread a blanket from the car. After they ate, Helene made him tell her about prison. It was easy to talk to her, since her late father and her husband had been convicts, and Joey went on for nearly an hour, getting all the hatred and bitterness off his chest.

When he was through, Helene lay back, her eyes closed. "Joey, this job with Carl—why are you doing it? What do you expect to get out of it? You're not like Carl, you're still young enough to make it in some honest business."

"So are you."

"It's too late for me. I was committed to this life years ago, but you could still get out. Start saving your money, Joey, the way Carl suggested. Ask his advice on how to invest it, and when your stake's big enough, leave town. Go where nobody knows you and buy a store or gas station or something. That's what Floyd's planning to do. He says—"

Joey leaned over and kissed her—lightly. It should be lightly, the first time, and she didn't resist.

He pulled his head back. Her eyes were open wide now.

"Never mind Carl," he said, "and Floyd, and that crazy idea about saving money. Money's your best friend; you don't lock it up in a bank, you spend it. So let's concentrate on you and me."

He started to kiss her again, but she twisted away and got quickly to her feet. "No hard feelings, Joey. But for a million reasons, what you're thinking just wouldn't do for either of us."

"We'll see." Smiling, he rose. She'd come around eventually, he was increasingly sure of that. He could sense it in her, the yearning for affection, even the kind he offered. It must be miserable for her, living with a cold fish like Krueger. "Like you said, I'm a very persistent guy."

A light rain fell, and the pavement glistened. That was good. The rain had cut business in the supermarket. With fewer checks to be cashed, there'd be more money in the cashier's cage.

It was 8:32 P.M. Friday, and as Joey slipped into the phone booth, he

saw Mrs. Walters alone in the cashier's cage. This was the time to strike. Both checkout girls were occupied ringing up larger orders, and the store manager had disappeared somewhere in back.

His heart pounding, Joey dialed the number of the phone booth in which Krueger waited. After the phone rang six times, he hung up, and the dime dropped down into the slot.

Joey slipped the coin into his pocket and walked out of the booth. The woman behind the cigar counter didn't even look up as he passed. On the sidewalk, he paused a moment. Mrs. Walters had just reached for her own phone, and now she tensed, putting a hand on the edge of the cage to steady herself.

Slowly, Joey crossed the street: Mrs. Walters was a nervous type, all right. For a moment, he thought she'd go to pieces, but she pulled herself together, reached for a shopping bag, and frantically began to stuff money into it.

Joey was standing outside the supermarket, perhaps fifteen yards from the entrance, when Mrs. Walters stumbled out of the cage with the bag and walked hurriedly to the door, which swung open as she broke the electric eye's beam.

She dropped the bag to the sidewalk. She was in such a panic, though, that she walked right back into the exit door, which didn't budge, since it only opened out. Wailing, she fell to her knees.

Quickly, Joey walked toward the bag. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a customer in the store point, as a man in a white jacket ran forward from the produce department.

Joey shed caution. He scooped up the bag and sprinted along the sidewalk, brushing past one pedestrian and almost knocking another down. He heard a shout.

Joey rounded the corner. Ahead, a car's lights snapped on and a motor popped. The front door swung open. Joey dived inside, and slammed the door. Helene knifed the car into the street, accelerating so fast that Joey was flattened against the cushions. The car squealed around three or four corners and then slowed to a legal speed.

"They saw the car," Helene said tautly, "but they weren't able to follow." She wore dark slacks; a black sweater, and a man's cap, which she removed now, letting her hair tumble.

"Whose car is this?" Joey asked, breathing heavily.

"Stolen. It's not on the hot sheet yet, though. Anyway, we'll switch cars soon, so collect that money. When you got in, some of it fell out of the bag."

Joey reached for the bills on the floor, while Helene braked the car at a stop sign, then gunned it down a ramp to an expressway.

"Don't take your gloves off," she warned. "The cops will go over the car for prints."

"You know," Joey exulted, "I didn't think it'd work."

"Carl can be damned convincing. I feel sorry for that old woman."

"Jeez, there's lots of money here."

"Don't count it yet. We're still not clear."

Ignoring her, Joey pawed through the bag. "Must be eight, ten thousand. Maybe more. I never saw so much money. And two or three grand of it's mine. . . ."

Another mile, and they left the expressway, twisting along a maze of side streets to a deserted industrial section, where Helene parked. They got out and ran to another car, Joey carrying the bag.

"Where are we going now?"

"To pick up Carl," Helene said, "and split the take." She drove them back to the expressway. "Well," she added wearily, "we're all right now. This car's nothing like the one we got away in, and with the cap on, in the dark I looked like a man. They're not looking for a woman driver."

"Carl figures all the angles, doesn't he? Calculates all the odds?"

"Sonny, he sure does."

Yawning, Joey stretched. "With my share," he drawled, "I'll head down to Mexico and live like a king until the cash runs out. I'll stay at a swank motel and have me everything I want."

"Carl told me you had some crazy stunt like that on your mind."

"You still want me to invest it? The way Carl does?" Joey laughed. "That's rich. He's married to a good-looking woman like you, but he hoards his pennies and makes you live in a sleazy dump behind a secondhand furniture store. If you were my wife, Helene—"

"I told you, kid, I'm Carl's wife, and he's done a lot for me."

"If you were my wife," Joey went on relentlessly, "I'd take you out of that slum and fly you to Acapulco or somewhere. You deserve it. I bet Carl hasn't given you a chance to live it up for years."

"We're thinking of the future."

"Future, smoocher. You might not have a future. You might get killed tomorrow, hit by a car while crossing the street. Carl's all wrong, Helene. He should set you up in a fancy apartment and buy you nice clothes, while you're still young enough to enjoy those things."

She didn't reply.

Now was the time, Joey decided, to make his pitch. "Look, why don't you tell Carl you want a little vacation of your own? A week or two in Mexico to rest up, until the heat from this job dies down. I won't tell him where I'm going, and we can meet there. All day, we'll just lounge around the beach, or go shopping. And at night—"

"Shut up," Helene snapped. "Not another word. I don't wanna hear any more about it."

"Sure." Joey shrugged. He'd expected some protest, but the vehemence of Helene's reply surprised him. He was getting to her, all right. "But think it over. I'm not leaving for a week."

A moment later they drove off the expressway and wound through a slum. Finally, Helene parked in a block of empty buildings, vacated to make way for an urban renewal project. About thirty yards from them, a shadowy figure lurked in a doorway.

"That's Carl," Helene said. "He didn't want you to be seen at the store tonight. Go help him, his leg was bothering him earlier."

Annoyed at the request, Joey opened the door and climbed out. "What's wrong with his damn leg?"

"Riot gun blast, the last time he was arrested."

Frowning, Joey walked toward the doorway. The thought of touching Krueger revolted him somehow. Poor Helene, on top of everything else she must have to be his nurse.

Joey was about halfway to the figure when he realized it wasn't Carl. This man was taller, and there was something different about the cane. It was cradled under his arm, the tip not touching the ground.

The man stepped into the light. He was younger than Carl, his features a lean, stony mask, and the thing under his arm was a short-barreled rifle.

Helene put her head out of the car window and shouted, "He's the one, Floyd." She gunned the motor; the car squealed from the curb.

Instinctively, Joey turned and ran. Despite the sudden, gut-churning fear that was overwhelming him, he thought clearly enough to know that

if he could reach the mouth of the nearest alley and duck down it, he'd have a chance. His legs flashed, and the rubber soles of his sneakers thumped on the pavement.

Unhurried, Floyd dropped to one knee, in the trained marksman's kneeling position. He fired once. Joey was dead before he hit the sidewalk.

Carl Krueger lit a cigar and gazed at the money, which was stacked neatly on a table. "Good haul, Helene. More than eleven thousand. But we won't try that stunt again for a long time, not after the publicity that'll follow this job."

"How much," Helene asked, "did we net?" They were back in the apartment behind the furniture store, and Helene sat in a chair, filing her nails.

Carl swept the money back into the bag, limped to an open safe and shoved the bag into it. "Let's see, our expenses came to about twenty-five hundred. Floyd's fee for the contract on Joey, fees for the rental of two stolen cars, ten percent to the man who found the job for us, plus those three payments of forty dollars to Joey. That leaves us a profit of more than eighty-five hundred."

"I wonder about Joey, Carl. You never made me do anything like that before; you always left me out of it. He was a good kid. As I told you last week, I don't think you gave him much of a chance."

"He had plenty of chance," Krueger argued. "I told him to save his money. I even agreed to let you lead him on a little, to try to talk some sense into him, but he wouldn't listen. I met plenty of his kind in the penitentiary. He'd spend his share on a binge, the cops would wonder where an ex-con got all that dough, and our whole operation would be endangered. If they could tie him to the supermarket job, they'd pick him up and induce him to turn state's evidence. Even if they didn't, they'd watch him and learn he worked for me, ruining the respectable front it took so long to establish."

Laboriously, Carl crossed the room, turned on a television set, and sank into a chair. "Anyhow, look at it this way. Disposing of Joey was a sound investment. If we'd cut him in for his twenty-five per cent, our net would have been less than seven thousand, and we'd have had to go on paying him forty a week, even though we wouldn't need him again

until next year. Hell, we can always get another runner."

"I suppose you're right. Just the same—"

"Forget Joey," Carl advised. "We'll take our eighty-five hundred and do like always; half in the savings and loan, half in stocks."

"How much are we worth now?" Helene asked.

"Eighty-five, ninety thousand. Some of our stocks dropped last month, but they'll bounce back."

"I been thinking," Helene lit a cigarette. "Why don't we take a trip? To Mexico, maybe. We could use a vacation. We've been going like this for five years, one job after another. I'm tired."

Carl snorted in disgust. "Kid stuff. I thought you knew better. When you've got money you treat it with respect. You make it work for you."

"It's been so long."

"Can that!" Krueger frowned. "Oh yeah, I promised Floyd we'd pay him tonight. Put a thousand in an envelope, hey, and take it to his place. That's the lug's standard fee for a homicide."

"All right." Helene rose. "I'm still on edge, I can use the air."

She found an envelope, put two thousand dollars in it instead of one, and turned the store lights on as she walked out. When she phoned later and Carl came out to answer, he'd make a perfect target. Floyd could get him right through the window.



Lady with a Hobby

by Raymond E. Banks

I always say a person needs a hobby. Man *or* woman. Look at me. I fish. Sure, that doesn't help togetherness, but as I tell Andrea, my wife, we appreciate each other the more when I've had a good weekend on the ocean lugging in barracuda, sea bass, and so forth.

On the other hand, she just grinds along, a little housework, a little gardening, a little shopping, and much chasing the kids. She gets in a rut and the first thing you know she's griping about the fact that we need new rugs, or else the car she drives is a beat-up old Studebaker, and why can't we have one of those cute foreign cars. Even a trip to Europe.

"Look," I tell her. "The heart attacks go to Europe. The ulcers. Do you want me to be one of those driven types that makes you a widow at fifty-five?"

"At least I'd be a widow with a new rug," she said.

But they don't catch me in that spiral. I'm assistant manager at the Best Bargain Market, and I leave my job when we lock the door. Young at forty, and I'll be younger at fifty.

At least that was the way it was until a year ago.

One night the Evanses came over. You know the type. There's a couple like this in every circle. They argued going up the aisle and they've been fighting ever since. One good insult deserves another, and these folks have had lots of practice. We were playing cards. Sam Evans trumped Deborah's ace and she said, "For a nickel I'd take a blunt instrument to you."

"Thanks and redoubled," said Sam. "You try it, gives me an excuse to drive a stake through your black little heart."

"I'd give five hundred dollars for the first brave man shoots you dead," said Deborah Evans, and my wife Andrea suddenly looked up from staring at the old rug, because bridge bores her and said, "I'll bet you wouldn't."

"Huh," snorted Deborah. "Try me!"

Andrea brightened up and got real interested in the bridge game. Naturally, I didn't think much of it at the time. I meant to mention it later, but that was Friday night and I had to lay out my tackle for the Saturday sport-fishing boat and I forgot.

When I rolled out early Andrea was up and had packed my lunch. "Well, thanks," I said.

"No trouble," she said. "The Evanses are going on a picnic and invited me along, so I had to make a lunch anyway."

"Remember me to the ants," I said, and took off.

Poor Sam Evans caught it that day. As it turned out later, they had been picnicking in that park down by the seashore and Sam got to showing off, fooling around by the edge of the rocks. It's about one hundred and twenty-five feet down, and Sam forgot he couldn't fly.

I got pretty mad at the funeral because it didn't particularly seem sad, the way the funeral ought to be. I mean, the way things change in this modern age, at least some of the old customs ought to last. But I'll swear that Deborah Evans was as dry-eyed as an orange peel in the sun.

"By God, I believe she's really glad Sam's dead!" I told Andrea.

"Sam was awful to her," said Andrea. "Simply awful. She told me all about it."

The rug was delivered about two weeks later. "Now, Andrea," I said, "I don't particularly understand about the rug. We have thirty-eight dollars in the savings, and this must've cost—"

"Five hundred, Hal," she said. "Only five hundred."

"I don't care for that number exactly, Andrea," I said. I mean you have to be firm with women. There's a tone I get in my voice so she knows I'm more or less serious. "How come five hundred shows up in your life right now?"

"But, Hal, I told you. Aunt Martha in St. Louis died last year and left a little money. Can't you remember anything?"

"That was way back," I said.

"Last year, honey," she said, laughing with the blue eyes and pinching my arm. "It takes a long time to finish a probate in Missouri."

"Let me see the letter from the lawyer."

She pointed at the disorder of my desk. I haven't exactly kept the papers up to date there.

"Just the same I'm going to find that letter," I told her. "I may even write to the Supreme Court of Missouri. That's mighty poor probating."

But as it turned out the albacore came in that Saturday and I didn't get around to it.

"The car broke down again," Andrea told me.

"Don't worry in the least about it," I said. "In exactly twenty-three months we'll pay off my car. Then we can get you another car."

"It seems like a long time to wait."

I lifted her chin with my hand. I mean, women are girls, really; you have to often give them fatherly advice. "For forty years I have wanted a sport-fishing boat of my own," I said. "As a skipper I could make twice what I make now in a year, just during the fishing season. It only takes twenty thousand to start. Some day I'll have it. But not tomorrow. You see, you have to work these things out."

"So *that's* what that special savings account of yours means, where it has 'SFB' on the cover."

"Sport-fishing boat. Correct. You see how I plan for the future?"

"How much in the account?"

"It's not that. It's the principle—"

"How much?"

"Eleven dollars and sixty-seven cents," I said, "but I'm truly not worried. I'm a patient guy."

That night the Markhams, who play a sharp bridge hand, came over. They are a fine couple, if you can keep them off their weakness. Their weakness is his mother, who lives with them. They get pretty desperate about the woman. "I'd give a thousand dollars to be free of her," laughed Sarah. "Today she changed our phone from a single line to a party line while I was shopping. She wanted company. She gets into things."

"It's not that she isn't a wonderful mother," said Don. "But she likes to talk to door-to-door salesmen. We own three vacuum cleaners, two sewing machines, and hold lifetime subscriptions to twelve magazines."

"She pulls up my daisies in the garden," said Sarah.

"She gave a wad of money we gave her for new clothes to my sad-sack younger brother," said Don.

"A thousand dollars!" my wife said. "That still could be an economy for you."

"It's my bid!" I cried, because of the turn of the conversation. "Four no trump!"

I went down 2,000 points on that hand.

About a week later, after the albacore had quit running, I came home one night and found a Volkswagen in the driveway. I literally ran into the house.

"It cost only a thousand," said Andrea. "With my old car and a small monthly payment, which I can handle from the grocery money."

"Andrea," I said. "Andrea, I want to talk to you—"

"Yes, dear."

I tried to explain to her about hobbies. You don't *invent* a hobby—you pick something that a lot of other people do. It's all right to be creative, but—God!

She drew a bead on me with her clear blue eyes, and it was plain she was wondering how much I knew. I remember at the time she held a breadknife, kind of waving it, so it glinted, and it seemed she was different somehow.

"Look, Hal," she said. "You have your hobby. I have mine. Let's don't get into each other's hair."

I wasn't exactly frightened. It's a man's job to set his wife right, whatever the danger. "I am going to buy you a stamp album," I said. "Some beginning stamps—right out of my SFB fund."

I turned my back right on her and went to my room and locked the door and then picked up the phone.

"How are things going?" I asked Don Markham when I got him on the wire.

"Fine, Hal, fine."

"Mother O.K.?"

"Oh," he said. "I guess you haven't heard—"

My breath got shorter and my hands began to sweat. "No, I haven't, old buddy."

"Auto accident," he said. "Very sudden—"

It was late in the fishing season and I was out on a boat with Al Grubel. You meet all kinds on the public sport-fishing boats. Poor folks, medium folks, and rich folks. You'd think that rich folks would hire charter boats, or run their own, and some do, but the truth is, the charter boat captains

are what we call "weekend skippers." They don't know the best fishing spots. The good fishing spots change from day to day, so the man who can take you right to the best spot is the daily-traveling public boat skipper, like I planned to be one day.

Al Grubel is a lawyer with a lot of classy clients. I'd been kind of asking him legal questions during the summer, like the best way to beat a murder case and how much it costs to defend one, and whether a woman killer had a better chance than a man.

"If you know a killer," Al said that day, "I could use one."

"I don't—exactly. But you meet all kinds in the grocery store business," I told him. "Why?"

"Well, it's because of the way you've been talking. You see, I have a problem with my wife, Hal. We're five years married and quite honestly I can't see the next five."

"How about divorce?"

"She's fifty-eight," said Al. "Also she owns three-quarters of a million dollars from before we were married. I am the heir."

"If I knew anybody—"

"I'd pay twenty thousand," said Al. "A full, ripe twenty thousand—"

That night when I got home, I caught Andrea hanging up the telephone in a suspicious hurry. I noticed she also was writing on a newspaper. But it wasn't the paper that startled me. It was the name she had scribbled. I got a peek; it was Joe Vecchi. Anybody who's ever listened to the gossip along the sport-fishing boat rail knows he's a bad one—syndicate, mafia, gangster, killer, gambler, collection man—

"Andrea," I said softly. "A hobby is supposed to be like amateur. I mean, you don't have a hobby to make money with. You have a husband for that."

"You're saving up to buy a sport-fishing boat and change your hobby into a living," she said. "So why shouldn't anybody?"

I tried to explain to her about syndicates, and that she wouldn't be happy as an associate of that crowd. She wouldn't listen.

"We need a new house," she said. "Houses cost money."

I could see then that I would have to give her the Grubel killing to keep her from getting too involved with low types.

Mrs. Grubel turned out to be a dislikable old gal, a real boozier with red eyes, a wrinkled face like a ball of rubber bands, and a figure like a

pencil. She also complained of a smell of fish when I was in the room, which I thought was uncalled for.

Andrea played her usual game of listless bridge, studying her victim. I choked up a little with pride, noticing how professional Andrea had become. She asked just the right questions about how the old doll lived, and I could see she was laying it all out in her mind. It just shows you what a husband can do, if he handles a wife firmly and gets her started in the right direction.

"We're going to buy a new house soon," Andrea said aloud suddenly.

"Or maybe even a sport-fishing boat," I said, feeling the evening was a success. I winked at Al, who winked back and bent cheerfully over his cards.

"No," said Andrea a few days later.

"What do you mean, 'No?'" I asked.

"I do not want to go out with Mrs. Grubel for an evening on the town," she said. "Not tonight. I am going to watch television tonight."

Since I had carefully set all of this up, I was enormously disappointed. There was a poker in the back seat of my car. In my glove compartment a bottle of poison and my quite-sharp fish-scaling knife. Al was out of town, establishing his alibi. We had gone to a movie the night before. We'd go back briefly tonight, quickly in and out. That we'd been at the movie would be our alibi.

"Twenty thousand," I reminded Andrea.

"All you talk about is money and killing," she said. "I'm surprised you'd consider murder. I'm worried that you need a head doctor."

This was the pattern of your killer personality, I thought. They call the rest of the world insane. After we had the sport-fishing boat, Andrea might have to go somewhere for treatments. I mean, when you get to doing things like getting rid of people, you get these enormous guilt feelings and go off your peanut. But I intended to stand by her. With the proceeds from the boat next season, I could support her in a nice, private sanitarium for a couple of years, and it wasn't as if these killings had really outraged society. They'd done more good than harm, and I was proud of her for that. True, she might have to be locked up the rest of her life, but I'd call on her every week during the off-fishing season and bring her fruit.

She kept saying, "No," but I whetted her appetite by talking about how easy it would be. I mean, somebody with a hobby, they can't resist

that old firebell, like somebody sidling up to me and hollering, "Yellow-tail!"

I told her I'd meet her at High Point in the Palos Verdes hills, near where Sam Evans stepped out into space. It was a nice, lonely spot overlooking the ocean and Andrea could pursue her hobby while I kept lookout. Actually, it was better if she came along later.

Before I left, Andrea said, "Hal, there's something I've been meaning to tell you."

"No, Andrea," I said. "Tomorrow, yes. Not tonight. If you've been doing something you shouldn't, tell me tomorrow. You watch TV, then meet me at High Point at midnight. O.K.?"

She sighed and waved her hands helplessly. She knew as well as I that her killer's blood was up.

I had more trouble with Alice Grubel than I thought I would. I propped a ladder against her house, because I didn't want anybody to see me come to the front or back door, and the method of taking her out seemed to fire her romantic instincts right away. She thought I was interested in her—emotionally. She began telling me how awful life was with Al Grubel.

We stopped for drinks at a bar; the liquor made her more romantic. In the car going to High Point, she squeezed next to me, and I kept telling her her belt was cutting into my side, but it was actually her hip-bone that was doing it.

At High Point, I quickly realized that it was not only a suitable murder site, but a lover's lane location with a number of cars already parked there. So we had to wait.

I powdered the whiskey I had brought with some poison, but she went perverse on me and didn't want to drink. She just wanted to demonstrate how fond she was of me.

It got so bad, I felt that I must be rid of her—even before Andrea arrived. In desperation, I pulled out the knife. The first thing I knew she was playfully scurrying out of the car and snapping the knife into the ground, telling me how she used to play mumblety-peg when she was a little girl. I joined her, snapping the knife into the ground getting up the nerve to use it.

Andrea didn't show up, during this interval, but a State Trooper did. He came out of the shadows and joined us. "I always liked the game,"

he said, snapping the knife into the ground. Pretty soon some of the guys and gals from the other cars came over to watch and snap the knife into the ground. Next somebody built a fire and began to sing. As it turned out somebody else had some marshmallows—boxes of them—that we could toast.

"Only trouble is," said the Trooper, "you can't build a proper fire without a poker to keep it stacked right."

So I got the poker out of the car. We poked the fire, toasted marshmallows, played mumblety-peg and sang to the moon.

"Keeps the kids out of trouble," the Trooper said, his arm around one of the girls. "Much rather have them out from those dark cars in front of a bright campfire, singing and toasting the marshmallows."

I hustled off in the darkness. I was afraid Andrea would show up and fire off a gun or something.

I went down the road and waited. Back at the campfire I could hear a shout of hilarity and cheer. But I didn't know what it was until I returned to the fire.

The State Trooper was waving my bottle to the moon. He apologized for being so forward as to have borrowed it from my car. "Friends," he said, "we have all taken a good drink due to the fellowship of the evening. While I don't often drink on duty, I'll have a nip with you, because this has been a fine evening!"

Then he turned up my bottle of liquor and drank a deep draught of the stuff.

I remembered suddenly—and with horror—that I had laced the whole bottle with arsenic.

"How—how many have had a drink?" I screamed in panic.

"Why, everybody!" Alice exclaimed, waving her arm to include all—eight people around the fire. She snatched up the bottle from the Trooper, who was smacking his lips. "Oh, you should have the last of it, Hal. After all, it is your liquor."

"I should indeed," I thought sadly, eight victims, and killed the rest of the bottle and began weeping like a baby.

Andrea sat by my bedside and held my hand. "It was touch and go with you," she said. "The heaviest dregs went to the bottom of the bottle."

"How many—made it?" I asked weakly.

"They all made it, Hal. That arsenic has been hanging around since

before World War II. It wasn't very potent. Just made them sick. They'll only try you for attempted mass murder. Al Grubel says you'll probably get off with five-to-ten. Of course there are civil lawsuits and a very angry ex-State Trooper."

"You let me down!" I cried. "You knew the murder ropes. You should've come."

She shook her head. "No, Hal. I don't know anything about murder. My hobby is—gambling!"

"But Sam Evans!" I cried.

"True, I got the idea that night while we were playing bridge. That is, to make gambling my hobby. But I didn't harm Sam. He was showing off for some disgusting young girl in the park that day. He stepped over the cliff all by himself. Deborah and I weren't within a hundred feet of him. And there were just dozens of witnesses."

"But Don Markham's mother! What about her?"

"You had the Plymouth. My Studebaker was broken down. I couldn't have run over her if I wanted. It was really an accident. You know how old people get careless. No, my hobby is gambling, and I'm pretty good on the horses, if I do say so myself. I was afraid you'd found out that night you caught me with the racing form with that gambler Vecchi's name and phone number on it."

"Andrea—Andrea—" I cried, thinking life's just full of coincidences. It's only in fiction you don't find them."

She reached behind her and put the stamp album I had bought for her on my stomach. "Study it, Hal. There's no fishing in the pen, you know. And in five years, you ought to have a good stamp collection. And by that time, if the horses keep on being nice to me, I'll have a new house and maybe a sport-fishing boat too. Like you said, everybody ought to have a hobby."



The Witness Was a Lady

by Fletcher Flora

It was a Thursday morning when Corey McDown called me. I hadn't heard from Corey for a long time. Not directly. After he got to be a cop, we sort of drifted apart and lost contact with each other. I'm not exactly allergic to cops, you understand, but it usually turns out that we're incompatible.

Corey was a bright guy, and he'd moved up fast in the force. He was pretty young for a lieutenant in Homicide.

"Hello, Mark," he said. "Corey McDown here. Did I get you out of bed?"

"I don't have to get out of bed to answer the phone," I said. "How are you, Corey?"

"I've been worse," he said, "and I've been better. I wonder if you'd do me a favor."

"Do I owe you a favor?"

"Do this one for me, and I'll owe *you* one."

"You think I may need it?"

"You may, Mark. You never know."

"True. There have been times before. What's on your mind, Corey?"

"I hate long telephone conversations. Ask me over."

"Sure, Corey. Come on over."

"Give me thirty minutes."

He hung up, and so did I. It must be a big favor he wanted, I thought, to make him so accommodating. I had an uneasy feeling that it was related to something that I didn't want to think about, and I wished I could quit. I got out of bed and shaved and showered and dressed, which used up the thirty minutes. I had just finished when the door buzzer sounded, and I went out across the living room to the door and opened it.

"Right on time," I said. "Come on in."

He came in and tossed his hat into one chair and sat down in another.

His hair was cut short, a thick brown stubble, and he looked trim and hard. Right now, leaning back and smiling, relaxed.

"You've got a nice place, Mark. You live well."

"Heels always live well. It's expected of them."

"You're not a heel, Mark. You're just a reasonably good guy with kinks."

"Thanks." I walked over to a table and lifted a glass. "You want some breakfast?"

"Out of a bottle?"

"Is there another place to get it?"

"I had mine out of a skillet. You go ahead."

I poured a double shot of bourbon and swallowed it fast. Then I went back and threw his hat on the floor and took its place. The double helped me feel as relaxed as he looked.

"Go on," I said. "Convince me."

"Don't rush me. I'm trying to think of the best approach."

"The best is the simplest. You want a favor. Tell me what it is."

"Let me ask you a question first. You seen Nora lately?"

"No. It's been forever. Why?"

"I thought you might have looked her up when Jack Kirby was murdered."

"I didn't."

"That's strange. Old friends and all, I mean. The least an old friend can do when an old friend's boy friend is killed is to offer sympathy and condolences and all that."

"My personal opinion is that congratulations were in order. I didn't think it would be in good taste to offer them."

He looked across at me, shaking his burr head and grinning. The grin got vocal and became a loud laugh.

"You see, Mark? All you've got are a few kinks. A real twenty-four carat heel like Jack Kirby offends your sensibilities."

"Go to hell."

"Sure, sure. Anything to oblige. What I'm leading up to is, this favor isn't really for me at all. Oh, incidentally it is, maybe, but mostly it's a favor for Nora."

"You sound like a man about to be devious, Corey."

"Not me, Mark. Whatever I may be that makes me different from you, I'm not devious. I haven't got the brains for it."

"O.K. Tell me the favor for Nora that's one for you incidentally."

"I'll tell you, but let's get the circumstances in focus. Did you read the news stories about Jack Kirby's murder?"

"Once over lightly."

"In that case, you'll remember what the evidence indicated. He had an appointment with someone in his apartment. At least someone came to see him there, and this someone, whoever it was, killed him. Cracked his skull with a heavy cut-glass decanter, to be exact. This was all in the news stories, and it's all true. What wasn't in the stories, because we put the lid on it, is that someone pretty definitely knew who it was in the apartment with Kirby that night. That someone is Nora."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind how. We know."

"That won't do, Corey. You can't expect to clam up on the guy you're asking for a favor."

"All right. I'll tell you this much. The day of Kirby's murder, Nora told a friend that she was going to Kirby's apartment that night, but she couldn't go until late because Kirby was expecting someone earlier that she didn't want to meet. This friend is a woman whose testimony can be relied on. We're convinced of that."

"Didn't Nora mention the name of Kirby's expected guest?"

"No. No name. Just that it was someone she didn't want to meet there."

"Did you ask Nora?"

Corey looked down at his hands in his lap. He folded and unfolded the blunt fingers. On his face for a few seconds there was a sour expression as he recalled an experience that he hadn't liked and couldn't forget.

"We hauled her in and asked her over and over for a long while. She wouldn't say. She denied ever having told her friend that she knew."

"I wonder why. You'd think she'd want to help."

"Come off it, Mark. You know why as well as I do. Jack Kirby was a guy who associated with dangerous characters. One of these characters killed him, and he wouldn't think twice about killing a material witness. Either to keep her from talking or in revenge if she did. If he couldn't do it personally, he'd have it done for him. Today or tomorrow or next year. Nora's been associating with some dangerous characters herself, including Kirby. She knows how they operate, Mark. She won't talk because she's afraid."

"Well, Nora's not exactly a strong personality. She'll break eventually. Why don't you ask her again?"

"I wish I could."

"Why can't you? Like you said, she's a material witness. You can arrest her and hold her."

"I could if I could get hold of her." He looked down at his hands again, at the flexing fingers. His face was smooth and hard now, the sour expression dissolved. "I should have held her when I had her, but that was my mistake. A man makes lots of mistakes for old times' sake."

"Asking and giving favors, you mean. That sort of thing."

"Maybe. We'll see."

"Speaking of favors, where do I come in? If you think I know where Nora is, you're wrong."

"That's not the problem. I already know where she is."

"In that case, why don't you pick her up?"

"Because she's across the state line. You may know that we don't have any extradition agreement with our neighbor covering material witnesses."

"I didn't know, as a matter of fact. Thanks for telling me. It may come in handy. I don't seem to remember reading any of this about Nora in the papers."

"I told you. It wasn't there. We've kept the lid on it. The point is, we can't keep the lid on any longer. The story's going to break in the evening editions, and that's what worries me."

"I can see why. You won't look so good, letting a material witness slip away from you. Tough. You expect me to bleed, Corey?"

"It's not that. I'll survive a little criticism. It's Nora I'm worried about."

"Old times' sake again?"

"Call it what you like, but you can see her position. She's a constant and deadly threat to Jack Kirby's killer, whoever he is, and the moment the story breaks, the killer is going to know it. He'll also know where to find her."

"I see what you mean. The threat works two ways."

"That's it. And that's where you come in."

"Don't tell me. You want me to go and talk to her and convince her that she's got to come back and turn herself in for her own good."

"You're a smart guy, Mark. You always were."

"Sure. With kinks. To tell you the truth, I'm not quite convinced that this mysterious visitor of Kirby's is going to be so desperate as you imagine."

"You think he won't? Why?"

"Well, Nora knows he was supposed to be at Kirby's at a certain time. At the time Kirby was killed. So she knows. That's not absolute proof that he was actually there. Even if he was there, it's not proof that he did the killing. It's a lead, Corey, not a conviction."

"A lead's all we need. The visitor killed Kirby. We're certain of it. Once we know who he was, we'll find more evidence fast enough. We'll know what to look for, and how and where to find it."

"You haven't told me yet where Nora is."

"About a hundred miles from here. The first place I thought to check. The natural place for a woman to run when she's scared and in trouble."

"Home?"

"What used to be. Down on the farm."

"Regression, as the psychs say. You were sharp to think of that right off the bat, Corey. You're quite a psych yourself."

He got up suddenly and walked over to a pair of matched windows overlooking a small court in which, below, there was some green stuff growing.

He stood there looking out for a minute or more, and then he turned and walked back but did not sit down again.

"You and Nora were always close, Mark, back there when we were kids. Closer than ever Nora and I were. I used to hate you for that, but it doesn't matter any longer. It's one of the things I've gotten over. The point is, she'll be in danger. I believe that or I wouldn't be here. She wouldn't listen to me, but she might to you. Will you go talk to her?"

"Why should I?"

"Do you have to have the reasons spelled out?"

"I can't think of any."

"As a favor for me?"

"I don't want to obligate you."

"For Nora, then?"

"Nora wants me to leave her alone. She told me so."

"Not even to save her life?"

"Nora's a big girl now. She associates with dangerous characters and makes up her own mind."

He stood looking down at me, his face as bleak and empty as a department store floorwalker's. Turning away, he picked his hat off the floor and held it by the brim in his hands.

"I guess those kinks are bigger than I thought," he said.

He went over to the door and let himself out, and I kept on sitting in the chair, thinking about a time that he'd recalled. She used to ride into town to high school on the school bus, Nora did. Corey and I were town boys. We were snobbish with the country kids until we met Nora, who was a country kid, and then we weren't snobbish any more. She was slim and lovely and seemed to move with incredible grace in a kind of golden haze. She was so lovely, in fact, that she intimidated me for almost a full year before we finally got together on a picnic one Sunday afternoon. After that, I began to know Nora as she was—as a touchable and lusty little manipulator, almost amoral, who already had, even then, certain carefully conceived and directed ideas about what Nora wanted out of life. I didn't love her any the less, maybe more, but I resigned myself to the obvious truth that I was no more at most than a kind of privileged expedient.

After high school, Nora and Corey and I drifted at different times across the hundred miles to the city. At first we saw each other now and then, but later hardly at all. Corey became a cop. Thanks to luck and cards and certain contacts, I learned to live well without excessive effort. As for Nora—well, I had just refused to do her a favor at Corey's request, but there had been plenty of others to do her favors, as there always are with girls like her, and some of the favors came to five figures. Jack Kirby had not been the first. Maybe he would be the last.

I stood up and walked over to the windows and looked down into the court, down at the green stuff growing. I wasn't used to the radiance of day, and the light seemed intensely bright, and it hurt my eyes. My head ached, and I wondered if I could stand another double shot, or even a single, but I decided that I couldn't. Turning away from the windows, I walked back across the living room and into the soft and seductive dusk of the bedroom. I lay down on the unmade bed and tried to think with some kind of orderliness, and the thinking must have been therapeutic, for after awhile I lost the headache, or became unaware of it.

Granted, I thought, that Nora knew the identity of Jack Kirby's visitor, who was also Jack Kirby's killer. Corey was convinced that she did, and Corey was a bright guy. Being a bright guy, it was funny how he could go so far wrong from a good start. It was funny, a real scream, but I didn't feel like laughing. Because she'd refused to talk, because she'd run and hid to escape the pressure that would certainly have broken her down,

Corey assumed that she was afraid of the consequences of pointing a finger, the vengeance of a killer or a killer's hired hand, but it wasn't true. It couldn't be. She had run from the pressure, true, but she had kept her silence simply because she did not want Jack Kirby's visitor to be known. For old times' sake. It was touching, really, and I appreciated it.

I went over in my mind again with odd detachment, as if I were reviewing an experience of someone else, the way it had happened that I had killed Jack Kirby. I hadn't intended to, although it was a pleasure when I did, and all I'd actually intended when I went up to his apartment that night was to pay an overdue debt of a couple of grand.

I had lost the two grand to Kirby in a stud game that proved to be the beginning of a streak of bad luck. In the first place, to show how bad my luck was beginning to be, I lost the pot on three of a kind, which is pretty difficult to do in straight stud. In the second place, to show how fast bad luck can get worse in a streak, I didn't have the two grand. All I had to offer was an IOU with a twenty-four hour deadline. The deadline passed, and I still didn't have the two grand. My intentions were good, but my luck kept on being bad. I got three extensions on the deadline, and then I had a couple of visitors. They came to my apartment about the middle of the afternoon, a few minutes after I'd gotten out of bed. I'd seen both of them around, and I knew the name of one of them, but the names didn't matter. It was a business call, not social. They were very polite in a businesslike way. Only one of them talked.

"Mr. Sanders," he said, "we're representing Mr. Jack Kirby in a little business matter."

"Times have been tough," I said.

"Mr. Kirby appreciates that, but he feels that he's been more than liberal."

"Thank Mr. Kirby for me."

"I'm afraid Mr. Kirby wants more than thanks. He wants to know if you're prepared to settle your obligation."

"How about a payment on account? Ten percent, say."

"Sorry. Mr. Kirby feels that the obligation should be settled in full. He's prepared to extend your time until eight o'clock tomorrow night. He expects you to call at his apartment at that hour with the full amount due and payable."

"Tell Mr. Kirby I'll give the matter my careful attention."

"Mr. Kirby wants us particularly to remind you of the urgency."

"Fine. Consider me reminded."

"Mr. Kirby wants us to remind you in a manner that you will remember."

This was the clue to go to work, apparently, for that's what they did. I wasn't very alert yet, it being several hours until dark, and I put up what might be called a sorry defense. In fact, I didn't put up any defense at all. The mute suddenly had me from behind in a combination hammerlock and stranglehold, and the talker, looking apologetic, belted me three times in the belly. At the door, leaving me doubled up on the floor, the talker stopped and looked back, an expression of compassion spreading among the pocks on his flat face.

"Sorry, Mr. Sanders," he said. "Nothing personal, you understand."

I wasn't able to acknowledge the apology with the good grace it deserved. After they were gone, I began to breathe again, and a little later I successfully stood up. The beating had been painful, but not crippling.

It was a break in a way, the beating was. It was the nadir of the streak, the worst of the bad luck, and now that things had got about as bad as they could get, they began immediately to get better. What I mean is, I took the ten percent I'd offered Kirby's hired goons and ran it through another game of stud and brought it out multiplied by twenty. A little better than four grand in paper with not an IOU in the bundle. By midnight I had in my possession, as the talking goon had said, the full amount due and payable.

The next night at eight, I was at Kirby's door. I rang the bell, and Kirby let me in. He was wearing most of a tux, the exception being a maroon smoking jacket with a black satin sash. I happen to have an aversion to satin sashes, on smoking jackets or anything else, and this put me in a bad humor. It made it more difficult than ever to be reasonable about the beating he had bought for me. Apparently I was wearing nothing to which he had a comparable aversion. His long, sallow face, divided under a long nose by a long, thin moustache, was perfectly amiable.

"Hello, Mark," he said. "Glad to see you."

"Even broke?" I said.

"Sorry." His face lost its amiability. "Poverty depresses me."

"Never mind. I'm not one of your huddled masses. I come loaded."

"Good." The amiability was back. "I was sure you could manage if you really tried."

I took the ready bundle from a pocket, two grand exactly, and handed it to him. He transferred it to a pocket of his offending jacket with hardly more than a glance, and this put me in a worse humor than I was already in, which was bad enough. I knew he would count the money the moment I was gone, and it would have been less annoying if he had counted it honestly in front of me.

"Now I'll have the IOU, if you don't mind," I said.

"Certainly, Mark." He took the paper out of the same pocket the money had gone into. "I hope you don't resent the little reminder I was forced to send you."

"Not at all. It was very courteous and regretful, and it only hit me where it doesn't show."

"I'm glad you understand. Will you have a drink before you leave?"

"Bourbon and water."

"Good. I'll have one with you."

He turned and walked over to a liquor cabinet and worked for a minute with a bottle and glasses. "I'm sorry I can't ask you to stay for more than one, but I'm expecting company."

"Company's nice if it's nice company."

"This is nice. Someone you once knew, I believe. Nora Erskine? Charming girl. Beautiful. She has a very warm nature. Very generous."

He came toward me with a glass in each hand, and I hit him in the mouth. Don't ask me why. Maybe a disciple of Freud could tell you, but I can't. He fell backward in a shower of bourbon and came up with a little gun in his hand, which seemed to indicate that he hadn't been quite so amiable and trusting as he'd appeared. The cut-glass decanter was there on a table beside me, and I picked it up and smashed it over his head, and he fell down dying and was dead in less than a minute.

Stripped to the bone, that was how I killed him. I tried to remember if I had touched anything besides the decanter and the outside of the door, and there seemed to be nothing, and so I wiped the neck of the decanter with my handkerchief and retrieved the two grand, which was no good to him, and left. I went home and thought about it, wondering if I should leave town incognito, but I decided that there was no need. The goons knew that I was supposed to be at Kirby's, of course, but the goons were old pros. They'd done a job and were through with it. They couldn't care less that Jack Kirby had got himself killed. As a matter of fact, if they made the logical deduction, I would probably go up im-

measurably in their regard. The result of my thinking was the decision that it was unnecessary to take any precipitate action. I only needed to proceed with caution, as the signs beside the highways say, in the direction I was going.

But that was then, and now was different. Now I knew that Nora knew, and Nora was not an old pro, and Nora would surely someday tell. Maybe not now or soon, but someday, the day she couldn't stand the pressure any longer, and the passage of time would not help or save me, for there is no statute of limitations on murder, not even murder which might turn out to be, with luck and a good lawyer, of lesser degree than first. And there was always the solid possibility, of course, of that grim first.

I could see that I had come to the time of decision now, and I didn't want to face it. Like many another in the same predicament, I found a way to avoid it temporarily, if not permanently. In any case it was simple. I simply went to sleep.

When I woke again, it was evening, but the hour of the day was the only thing that had changed, not me or the problem or anything that had to be considered and done or not done. I got up and washed my face in cold water and put on a tie and jacket and went downstairs onto the street. There was a newsstand on the corner, half a block away, and I went down there and bought an evening edition and carried it back to the apartment without looking at it. In the apartment, I poured another double shot and drank half of it and sat down and opened the newspaper, and there was the story on page one: Material Witness in Kirby Slaying Flees State. I read the story slowly, finishing the second shot of the double as I read, and it was reported about the way Corey had told it to me in the morning, how Nora was believed to know the identity of Kirby's visitor at the time of the murder, and how she had refused to talk, and how, finally, she had escaped into the next state, from which she could not be extradited. It was also reported in the story exactly where she had gone and now was, the home of her childhood not more than a hundred miles away, and this was what I needed in order to make the decision I had to make, and you can see why. Now that her location was no longer a secret shared by me and the police, Nora was in greater danger and, as a consequence, so was I. There was therefore no longer any reason for indecision or delay, although there was probably no reason for hurry either.

I sat there for quite a long while, and it began to get dark outside in

the city streets, and the incandescents and fluorescents and neons came on to drive the darkness back. I finally became aware, via my stomach, that I hadn't eaten all day, and that I had better eat something before I took another drink, which I wanted, and so I went out and had a steak in a restaurant down the street a few blocks. After eating, I walked back and had a couple more drinks in the apartment, and then I went down and got my car out of the garage in the basement and drove across town to a place where they were having a stud game. I won five hundred skins in the game, the good streak still running in the wake of the bad streak, and at some point in the time it took to win that much money, my mind made itself up and I knew what I was going to do. I dropped out of the game about three o'clock in the morning, a little after, and it was almost four when I got home.

In the bedroom of the apartment, I changed into slacks, sport shirt and jacket, heavier shoes. From a shelf in the closet I got a leather case that contained a .30-.30 rifle. I had been very good with a rifle when I was younger. There was no reason to believe that I wasn't still almost as good. I assembled the rifle and checked it and took it apart again. I put the parts back into the case and half a dozen cartridges into my jacket pocket. I don't know why I took so many, for chances were long that a dozen would not be enough if one wasn't. Carrying the case, I went back downstairs to my car and drove out of town.

It took me about three hours driving slowly, to reach the town where I had grown up a hundred years or so ago, and I did not drive into it after reaching it. Instead, I drove around it on roads I remembered, and beyond it on another road until I saw ahead of me, quite a distance and on the left, the white house of the Erskines. It sat rather far back from the road at the end of a tree-lined drive, though not so far as memory had it, and it had once been considered the finest farm home in the county, if not the state. Now it did not seem one-half so grand, a different house than I had known before, as if the first had been razed and a second built in its place in an identical design, with identical detail, but on a reduced scale.

I turned off before I reached the house, along the side of a country square. The road descended slowly for a quarter of a mile to a steel and timber bridge across a shallow ravine. There had been water in the ravine in the spring, and there would be water again when the fall rains came, but now the bed was dry except for intermittent shallow pools caught in

rock. After crossing the bridge, I pulled off the road on a narrow turning into high weeds and brush. Getting out of the car, carrying the rifle case, I climbed a barbed-wire fence and followed the course of the ravine through a stand of timber, mostly oaks and maples and elms, and across a wide expanse of pasture in which a herd of Holsteins were having breakfast. Pretty soon I left the ravine and cut across two fields at an angle and up a long rise into a grove of walnut trees on the crest. I stopped among the trees and assembled and loaded the rifle, and then I lay down and looked down the slope on the other side of the crest to the house where Nora was supposed to be. There was a stone terrace on this side of the house at the rear. On the terrace was a round table and several brightly striped canvas chairs. Wide glass doors led off the terrace into the house. No one was visible from where I lay under the walnut trees about fifty yards away.

After half an hour, I rolled over onto my back and lay looking up into the branches of the trees where the green walnuts hung, and I began to remember all the times I'd come here to gather the nuts when I was a kid, sometimes with Nora in the later years. We gathered them in burlap bags—gunny sacks, they were called—and later knocked the blackened husks off with a hammer. For a long time afterward, if we didn't wear gloves, our hands were stained with the juice of the husks, a stain like the stain of nicotine, and there was no way to get this stain off except to wear it off, and you could always tell the ones who had gathered walnuts late in the fall by the stain on their hands that wore on toward winter.

I could hear a cow bell jangling back in the pasture. I could hear a dog barking. I could hear the cawing of a crow above the fields, and I thought I could hear, closing my eyes, the slow beating of his black wings against the still air. Opening my eyes, I rolled over and looked down the slope again to the terrace, and there was Nora standing beside the table and looking up toward the walnut grove as if she could see me lying in its shadow. She was wearing a white blouse and brown shorts, and her face and arms and legs were golden in the morning light. Drawing the rifle up along my side into firing position, I had her heart in my sights in a second, and I had a notion that it was a golden heart pumping golden blood.

She must have stood there for a full minute without moving, maybe longer, and then she turned and walked across the terrace and through the glass doors into the house, and I lowered my face slowly into the

sweet green grass.. I could still hear the bell and the dog and the crow, and I could hear the voice of Corey McDow saying that Mark Sanders was just a guy with kinks.

After awhile I stood up and went back across the fields to the ravine and along the ravine through the pasture and the woods to the car. Driving to the city, I thought about what I had better do, and where I had better go, and how long it would take to learn to live comfortably with a constant threat, and I decided, although there was probably no hurry, that I might as well get my affairs in order and get somewhere a long way off as soon as possible.



Classified Continued *from page 352*

MISCELLANEOUS—Cont'd

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Scheme for Destruction

by Pauline C. Smith

“Let’s get this straight,” said Cliff Condon. “This man hired you, every Saturday night, to run over him. Right?”

The prisoner twisted his mouth, contracting his neck inside his tight collar, and nodded. “Yeah. That’s right. He’d lay down on the road. Then I’d back up the car and drive over him . . . straddle him and his camera,” he added.

Relaxed against the cell bars, Condon watched George Phifer as he sat on the edge of the bunk, running the palms of his hands over his now soiled brown gabardines. His eyes looked scared—small, brown, dull eyes, squinting with worry.

“Then one night you didn’t straddle him.”

“I straddled him, all right, but he’d pulled in another car on me—a newer, lower model. It didn’t clear.”

Thoughtfully, Condon sucked the inside of his cheek. “Let’s go back to the beginning,” he suggested, referring to the typewritten copy of the statement in his hand. “You met him in a bar. Right?”

“Yeah. Out in the Valley. It’s across the street from the rigging outfit where I work. Every evening when I’d knock off, I went over for a drink. One day, this yuk showed up.”

“Maury Temple. That his name?”

“He never said. I don’t think he did, anyway. When the cops told me who he was, it sounded familiar, so maybe he did tell me, after all.”

“Well, a formal introduction wasn’t necessary for the kind of proposition he handed you.”

“He didn’t hand it to me for a while. It took him a couple or three times before he gave me the pitch.”

“He just asked you, bluntly, to run over him . . . ?”

Phifer ran his fingers delicately over a hairline scar stretching from his jaw to brow. “He gave me a lot of double talk about angle shots and stuff

like that. Then he said he wanted to get a shot of a car going over a man. First thing I knew, I was runnin' over him."

Condon frowned, studying the prisoner. "Didn't you think that was kind of a funny thing to be doing?"

Phifer shrugged. "He wanted the picture. It was his money." He looked up. "He paid me twenty-five smackers a Saturday—and my dinner—and the drinks."

"Drinks?"

"Sure. After that first Saturday tryout, we did the Sunset Strip each time before we went on up to Mulholland Drive. This whatever-his-name-is didn't drink. He just talked and watched me lap it up."

"He did? What did he talk about?"

Phifer's laugh sounded like the yelp of an excited pup. "About me—and my dames. I give him a regular Kinsey Report."

"Hmm." Condon shifted his weight from one foot to the other, and moved to a more comfortable position.

"I think he was kind of a mama's boy, and got a bang out of what was goin' on that he couldn't do." Phifer's broad, scarred face worked with a thought he tried to make specific. "Like readin' a dirty book," he decided.

Condon's eyes were steady. "Could be."

"Well, that's it." Moving his head, Phifer loosened his collar. He stood. "Do you believe me? That other guy from the D.A.'s office didn't."

"That was the deputy. I know he didn't. I'm an investigator. I've got to gather what facts I can so the District Attorney can make some sort of plea."

"Well, I didn't kill the guy. He asked for it."

"I think he did," said Condon thoughtfully. "I really think he did."

Beckoning, he watched Phifer while he waited for the door to be unlocked.

The prisoner's face had become righteously indignant. "I don't see why it had to be me he asked. There were other guys on those bar stools."

Moving into the corridor without looking back, Condon conjectured, "Maybe you were picked before you got inside the bar. Maybe you were picked a long time ago."

The Los Angeles sun was bright behind the veil of smog. Sighing, Condon walked to a telephone booth. He asked for the District Attorney. "Tell him it's Condon," he said into the mouthpiece.

While he waited, he looked over the copy of the prisoner's statement in his hand. It was Maury Temple who held his interest. This Phifer character was run-of-the-mill stuff—a muscle man turning to suet, whose desires were basic, whose methods were direct, and whose every action was a simple equation.

Stooping, Condon answered the phone. "Well, I've finished talking to him," he reported, "and he hasn't changed his story any." He listened a moment. "Of course I think he's telling the truth," he said. "My theory is that, in the first place, he hasn't enough originality to make up a fairy tale—and, in the second place, it would need just that kind of unimaginative mind to enter into such a transaction in the first place."

Maury Temple had lived with his mother in the old section of town. After Condon had found the house, stepped to the porch, and rung the doorbell, he looked back at his parked car. It did little more than clear the curb. About enough space, estimated Condon, between the chassis and pavement for a horizontal man, if he were thin and his bones didn't protrude.

Enough for this woman, he thought, as the door opened. She was as tall as he, and angular. "Yes?" she questioned.

"Mrs. Temple?"

She inclined her head.

After explaining that he was from the District Attorney's office to investigate the death of her son, he was allowed to follow her through a dark hallway and on to the deep reds of the carpet in the living room.

"Of course," she assured him positively, "my son would never have had any relations with a man of that calibre. Not any." Her protruding teeth closed over the statement as if she had bitten off a length-of-thread. "The man is undoubtedly lying."

"Your son was a cameraman?"

"For World Wide. They make short features and special educational films." Her eyes were gray and cold as she said, "But he certainly wouldn't have done anything as dangerously stupid as to lie down in the middle of the street to photograph a car passing over him. They opened his camera and searched his film. He never took such a picture. The man is lying."

Condon looked around the room, at the old marble mantel, the porcelain globed lamps, and, finally, at the portrait on the library table.

"Is that your son?" The question was an opening only, for the pictured face was a replica of the woman's, as if it had been done in water color on damp paper so that the sharp lines were diffused. "He lived with you?"

"Of course. We were very close. He rarely left me alone even for an evening."

"How about the Saturday night his body was found?"

"He went back to the studio that night to do some work. He must have been on his way home."

"Yes, ma'am." Condon rubbed his jaw. "Now." Standing, he thrust his hands into his pockets, half turning from her. "I understand he was heavily insured. That he took out a recent additional policy."

Mrs. Temple stiffened.

"So heavily insured," persisted Condon, "that the insurance company is also doing some investigating with the thought in mind that his death might have been a devious method of suicide."

"They are mistaken." Mrs. Temple looked back at him with a set smile. "The last thing my son would think of would be to take his own life." She spread her well kept hands, spacing them neatly. "Suicide, as a matter of fact, was a frequent subject for his disapproval." Again she placed her hands in her lap and folded them.

"Yes, ma'am."

"He termed it a short-sighted final act, without speculative opportunity to reconsider."

Condon pursed his lips. "He did a lot of protesting along those lines . . . ?"

"It was an interesting subject with him. He claimed that unless one can build from destruction itself, by an organized plan, that the act of destroying is a waste."

Condon fingered his lip thoughtfully. "That's an interesting concept. Your son, then, felt that suicide should be the beginning of a scheme which would carry to an inevitable conclusion?"

"My son had a well-integrated mind." Mrs. Temple stood and smoothed her dress. Condon moved toward the hallway. He looked back at her.

"He wasn't depressed, was he?"

Mrs. Temple's face turned blankly interrogative.

"Your son. Had anything been bothering him?"

She stared at Condon coldly. "What could have been bothering him?"

He enjoyed his work. He had a fine home. He needed no other woman . . . It is really very simple," she went on. "This person who is now in custody overpowered my son on that lonely road. He stole the car and killed my boy."

Condon walked down the porch steps, his eyes on the neighboring Verdugo Hills. Standing there a moment, he looked toward the garage at the end of the driveway, then he walked the concrete ribbon and pulled the doors. Placing his hand on the fender of the parked car, he leaned over to peer underneath. There was about as much allowance, between the chassis and the pavement, as his own. Enough to clear a prone man if he didn't hunch a shoulder or raise a knee. The new car, which had finally done the damage, was impounded. It would be, Condon was sure, a good two inches lower.

He closed the doors behind him, walked down the driveway, and slipped in behind his own wheel.

The smog had thinned out in the Valley and the sun slanted into Condon's eyes beneath the visor. He drove to San Fernando Road and parked by a drug store. Inside, he shut the door of the telephone booth behind him and dialed the District Attorney's number.

"Yes," he said into the telephone, "I'm out in Burbank now. Just saw Temple's mother." He listened a moment. "She gave me more information than she thought she did," he said. "Temple was playing Russian roulette . . . Russian roulette," he repeated, "R-u-s . . . O.K., so you heard me. Then I'll explain it. It's a game, a gamble where you place one live cartridge in the cylinder of a six-chamber revolver. You spin the cylinder and then place the muzzle of the gun against your forehead. You've one chance in six of being killed. Well. The bullet in the gun was Phifer. When Temple spun it that first Saturday and didn't get it, he narrowed his chances the second Saturday by pouring liquor down the driver's throat . . . Yes, that's what I said. But that didn't work, either. So, on the last Saturday, he made sure the bullet was fired by getting a low-slung car."

Tapping his foot, Condon listened to the words in his ear. "Because," he answered, "I learned a little of Temple's philosophy this afternoon. Now, if I can discover what his plan was, I'll understand why he did it."

Condon hung up.

World Wide was a small, specialized studio, located on the edge of Burbank, in the middle of a flat acreage between a trailer court and a

metallizing company. It was enclosed with a brick wall, high enough to give it an air of exclusion.

Condon told the gateman who he was. "I want to talk to someone who worked with Maury Temple. Someone who knew him well."

"No one knew him well, mister." The gateman stepped into a stucco-booth and made a phone call, then he stepped out again. "Go to office eleven," he instructed. "There's a fellow can maybe answer a couple of questions." He pointed down the studio street.

Condon had been on the Warner lots, and Universal, both times with the impression of visiting a Continental city gone mad. This place was more like a staid university with a few irrepressible freshmen not yet indoctrinated. He passed a number of quiet offices and one sound stage where they were shooting a couple of space men about to take off, and reached Number Eleven.

A man stood in the doorway, waiting for him.

"Hi," he said. "My name's Kalis. You're out here about Maury Temple?"

Condon nodded. As he walked into the office and sat down, he looked around at the shelves of canned film. Stills were thumbtacked to the walls. The place held a typewriter desk and a work table.

His host perched on the corner of the desk. "That was a funny deal about Maury Temple," he said. "What gives? Was it an accident—hit-and-run, or what?"

Condon shrugged. "From where Phifer sits, it was an accident. From where Temple lies, it was premeditated."

Kalis frowned in an effort to understand.

"But it was no hit-and-run," explained Condon. "Phifer drove the car to the police station right after it happened—belligerent and self-righteous, wondering how in hell he got himself into such a bind. He thought the cops would pat him on the head and send him home with a veracity medal. But the story was too screwy, and he'd left Temple lying out in the road with his head bashed in. You don't tell crazy stories and you don't leave dead bodies where you drop them—so they locked him up."

"But . . ."

"Look." Condon leaned forward, placing his hands on his knees. "If it doesn't make sense to you, you're not alone. It doesn't come through to the Police Department, either, or the insurance company . . . What do you know about Temple?"

"Well," hesitated Kalis, "not much." He gestured vaguely around the office. "This was his old stamping ground. I inherited it."

Condon pointed to the cans of film. "Are there any pictures of a car running over a man in there?"

An uncertain light of understanding flashed in Kalis' eyes, then receded to leave perplexity. He shook his head. "No. Why?"

"He said he was interested in getting a picture like that. He wanted a shot of a car as it ran over a man."

The light flashed again and stayed. "If we'd have needed anything like that, we could have dug a pit here on the lot for the cameraman to shoot from, or built a ramp for the car to roll on . . ."

"Yes," agreed Condon, "I assumed so."

"Is that what Maury was trying to do, then? Get a shot of a car passing over him?"

"That's what he said he was trying to do."

"But it wouldn't clear . . ." Kalis narrowed one eye in thought. "Or hardly, anyway."

"His new car didn't. The last one he bought."

Kalis' mouth fell open. "We kidded him about that dropped-down job. He wasn't much for flash and we asked him if he was going in for whistle bait. But Maury didn't kid good. We only tried it once before—when he was carrying the torch for Elsie . . ."

Slowly, Condon straightened. "Who's Elsie?"

"Elsie Peters." Kalis whistled. "Brother! Talk about still waters running deep. She was a one!"

The two actors in space suits passed the open doorway. They grinned through their glass helmets and raised their padded arms in salute.

"She worked in personnel here. Nice kid, if you like 'em scrubbed and pure. Maury did. First time I ever saw his forehead go damp over a woman."

Condon stared at the speaker, attempting to resketch his visual picture of Maury Temple. It wouldn't work.

"Maury fell for her like a ton of bricks . . . No," Kalis amended his statement, "like a dead fish, like a cold, dead fish. That guy was strictly protoplasm. But he was gone on Elsie, I guess, in his own way, and the rigger blew the thing wide open."

Condon drew in a deep breath of fresh air. "Rigger?" he asked.

"Yeah. We hired him to move and reset a structure out on the lot."

Elsie signed him in, and I guess she broke out in spots the minute she was exposed to him." Kalis swung a leg from the desk, watching the sunlight splatter his shoe. "You know about simple girls and muscle men? Well, the simpler they are, the harder they fall for lusty goons. Her eyes felt his biceps—she was like a school teacher who suddenly gets a grown man for a pupil after having nothing more around than seven-year-old boys. Brother!" Kalis smiled weakly as he remembered.

"What was the rigger's name?"

Kalis shrugged. "We don't call 'em by name. They come in, do a job, and leave. It'll be on the books."

Condon nodded. "What did he look like?"

"A gorilla. With a scar on his face."

Condon relaxed.

"He was only here for a few days. It was long enough for him and Elsie to get the same idea, even if their viewpoints were different. She wouldn't know, of course, that he was an old hand at the game, and according to his rules, no holds were barred except legal ones."

Slowly, Condon shook his head.

"It hit Maury. Evidently his love was pretty warm down underneath his chilblains—or maybe it was pride." Kalis' forehead wrinkled with thought. "Maybe something else. I don't know. He was a deep one too. Anyway, all he did on the surface was let her go the rigger's way, and stick her picture in his desk drawer."

"Here?" asked Condon.

Kalis nodded. "I put all his things away when we found out what happened to him."

Condon stood. "Let me see them."

"Sure." Kalis swung off the desk and moved around to open a drawer. He laid out a notebook, a couple of keys, pencils, and a small framed photograph. "We put his professional equipment in a locker."

Condon picked up the picture and stared at it in sepia. The girl's face was angular, with strength and passion and possessiveness overlaid by her youth and repression. Her upper lip was short, her teeth prominent. The picture in Condon's hand shook as he realized how much she looked like Mrs. Temple.

"No wonder Maury Temple fell in love with her," he said softly.

Kalis, watching over his shoulder, laughed with embarrassment. "Never could see her, myself. But then, she wasn't my type."

"What happened to her?"

"She killed herself."

Slowly, Condon laid the picture on the desk. "She did?"

"Sure. Like I told you. To the rigger, it was an interlude. To her, it was for keeps."

"Well . . ." Condon looked at the picture again, then he wandered around the office with his hands behind his back. He looked over the cans of film, stacked like wheels on the shelves, ready to go. He turned and stared at nothing. "It's no wonder," he said, half to himself, "that Temple's favorite subject was suicide."

Kalis looked puzzled. He thought a moment. "I never heard him even mention suicide."

Condon took a moment to let his eyes rest on the man. "Not to you," he said impatiently. "Why should he talk about it to you? It was his mother he talked to. And when he talked to his mother, he was talking to the girl."

Kalis moved back a step, scratching his head.

"How about the rigger? Did he meet Temple while he was here?"

"No reason to. One was a cameraman—the other was a laborer."

"Then Temple would be likely to know the rigger and where to get hold of him, but the rigger would never recognize Temple. Right?"

"Well, sure . . ." Kalis' face held a confused suspicion. He reassured himself by becoming bored, sullenly rolling Maury Temple's pencils across the desk.

Condon hunched his coat squarely on his shoulders. He listened to an orchestra tuning up across the lot. He watched a shadow form in the sunset at the doorway. "You've helped," he said to Kalis. "You've helped a lot."

Kalis stopped the pencil under his fingers and looked up, surprised. "You mean the D.A. can work up a plea with what I gave you?"

"Well," qualified Condon, "not exactly. I doubt if a jury would believe what I've got to give them. I doubt if even the District Attorney will believe it . . . But I do, and it's my job to find the truth. Look," he said abruptly, "would you do me a favor?"

"Well, yeah. What is it?" Kalis became cautiously alert.

"Would you go over to the Personnel Office and find out the name of that rigger?"

"Sure. Will do. It'll be a little minute. We'll have to check back."

"Take your time. I'll use your phone while you're gone."

"O.K. Just tell the operator you want an outside line."

"All right."

As Condon watched Kalis lope through the door, he picked up the phone and talked a moment. Then he sat back to wait for a free line. Finally he dialed his number.

Waiting, he formed the words of explanation in his mind, and shook his head. The District Attorney wasn't going to like this. He wanted an investigation to come out black like guilt or white like innocence—it gave him a middle, politic lane to plea.

"Condon," he announced into the phone.

The two space men passed the door, this time in slacks and plaid jackets. They looked informal without their space helmets, and as insignificant as the rest of the world.

"Well, I've got it tied up," said Condon into the mouthpiece, "but you won't like it." He settled back in the swivel chair. "First, I'll go along with my statement that Phifer was telling the truth. Second, I was right about Temple playing Russian roulette—and third," he took a deep breath. "Now I know why he did it . . . What?" He listened closely, frowning. "You're on the wrong track. Look. His death was his sacrifice for falling in love . . . the insurance his recompense for daring to think of marriage with a girl in his mother's image who fell short of the image of his mother . . . No, I will not repeat that. I'll come on into the office and explain it—with pictures." He glanced over at the portrait on the desk.

"Oh, him?" He thought a moment. "We can't get him off. It'll turn out just like it was planned. He'll pay for his crime of Elsie Peters' suicide rather than Maury Temple's murder." Condon hung up on the words which ticked along the wire.

He sat there, then, waiting for Kalis to bring back Phifer's name from the Personnel Department.



And Seven Makes Death

by Jeff Heller

There were two classes of Americans who worked at the Algordo coffee plantation in Tia Losa, Brazil, and they were easy to identify. Mike Mulgrave, for instance, was a Shaver. His smooth cheeks meant that he considered the work "temporary," and that when circumstances were "right," he would abandon the plantation's hard, sweaty work for some leisurely office berth in the States. Joe Bascom, his roommate, was a Non-Shaver, and his bristly beard was symbolic of his resignation to a lifetime of expatriation. That was the rule, you were either a Shaver or a Non-Shaver, but the formula had a way of breaking down. Shavers like Mulgrave often remained at Algordo, or some other plantation, until they died. And sometimes, Non-Shavers like Bascom wandered off into the hot morning sun and were never seen again.

But Mike Mulgrave was going to prove the rule, everybody knew that. It was the calendar that convinced them. For the entire year Mike had spent at Algordo, he had been crossing off the numbers like a man coming to the end of a prison sentence. But it wasn't until the twelfth month of his servitude that Joe Bascom learned the true meaning of the counted days.

"Two more," Mike grunted at dinner one night. His eyes, crinkled by the strain of too much sunlight, flickered towards the calendar on the wall. He was a burly man given to short sentences, but Joe Bascom knew what he meant.

"Two more what?" he said casually. "Two more months, weeks?"

"Days," Mike answered. "Only two more days, Joe."

"To what?"

Mike put down his fork and stared through and beyond his bunkmate. Joe Bascom was a small, thin-shouldered man, with tiny features embedded in the scraggly black beard, but he had the bright inquisitive eyes of a jungle bird. The eyes glistened now, waiting for the confidence that

Mike Mulgrave seemed about to reveal.

Mike said, "I never told anyone about it, Joe. I didn't think I could trust anybody. But I know you're O.K."

Joe smiled invisibly in his beard. "Thanks, Mike. You know you can tell me anything. Is it some kind of trouble? Police trouble maybe?"

"Not exactly. It's a reward, a reward I've been waiting to collect for seven years. In two days, the seven years are up."

"What kind of reward, Mike?"

"The only kind. Money, Joe. Seventy-five thousand passports to the States. But maybe I'd better explain.

"It started back in '49, when I was hustling used cars back in Cleveland, Ohio. I met a girl, a woman, most beautiful woman that ever let me come within two feet. We were married, and I gave up my job on the lot to open my own franchise. But neither one worked out—the business flopped and so did the marriage; maybe they were inseparable, I don't know. But Helen liked sweet butter on her bread and fur on her overcoat, and I wasn't the guy to provide them. We started to quarrel. Quarrel, hell, I mean *fight*. When a pal of mine told me about a dealership in Rio, I wanted her to come with me and try it out, but she told me where to go. But I didn't go there. I went to South America."

He paused, and refilled his coffee cup. He took a long black swallow before continuing.

"The only thing is, I had an idea before leaving Helen. It came to me when I was making arrangements to leave her. We talked about a divorce, a settlement, stuff like that. I didn't have any kind of estate for her to live on, all I had was a load of insurance. That was what made me think of it, the insurance.

"I said to Helen, look. Suppose I didn't just walk out on you? Suppose we didn't get a divorce, or legal separation? Suppose I left you a suicide note instead?"

Joe Bascom's eyes increased their candlepower. He was puzzled. "A suicide note?"

"Don't get the wrong idea: I wasn't that desperate. No, the suicide note was going to be a phony. I was going to jump in the ocean, all right, only there was going to be a ship under me. Helen would have to wait seven years before I'd be legally dead. Then she'd collect one hundred and fifty grand. Half hers, half mine. Well," he grinned, "in two days I die, Joe. I've been waiting to die for a long, long time."

Joe's face elongated in open-mouthed admiration. He licked the bearded rim of his mouth.

"Fantastic scheme. Fantastic! But you're sure it will work? I mean, suppose she says to hell with Mike Mulgrave. What then?"

"I'd show up and she loses everything. No, Helen's too smart for that. She'll come across."

"Have you seen her, written to her, since you left?"

"Not once. Helen doesn't know where I am. Doesn't even know the name I'm using now."

"But you're here. She's there. How do you make the connection?"

Mike yawned, stood, and stretched his arms overhead. Life was never so good.

"We arranged it all before I went. When seven years were up, I would place a classified ad in the personals column of the Cleveland paper. She knows what it'll mean. *'Greybeard has itch for good times again. Reply Box so-and-so.'* A seven-year itch for seventy-five thousand dollars." Mike roared tickled-pink laughter, and brought his hand down on Joe's shoulder. "So help me, Joe, I'll never look at a coffee bean again. Not even in the can."

The smile on Joe's thin, hairy face broadened. "I'm happy for you, Mike. Two more days. I feel like celebrating."

"And we will. None of that local rotgut, either. Bonded straight bourbon whiskey."

Mike patted the calendar on the wall, tugged the belt more firmly up his middle, and left with Joe eagerly trailing his steps.

Two days later, Mike went into town and placed the classified advertisement through the American Express office. He and Joe stayed in town. Their celebration lasted through Saturday and part of Sunday. From bourbon, they went to cheap sticky local rum, and for a while monopolized two of the prettiest transients at the town's only hotel.

Then Mike settled down to some serious, but anxious waiting. Before, he had a single day to wait for, and a specific thing to do. Now there was no way of knowing the exact day the money would arrive. That was the terrible part of it. Every day he'd wait for the Willys to roll into camp, and watch Parker slowly go through the mail.

After two weeks, he'd grown considerably less jovial and more edgy.

"It's not like taking money out of the bank," Joe reasoned. "She has

to file a claim. There are interviews. Investigations. God knows what else. And then she has to mail the money here, and that takes time too."

"I suppose so," Mike said. "But you wouldn't be calm either, if you had that kind of money coming to you. I'll give her time, but I won't wait forever."

In the following days, Mike drank heavily. He even forgot to shave, and a beard that was red at the sideburns and at the chin covered his perpetually oily face. Joe's equanimity riled him. They argued and for days didn't talk.

Finally, a month after the first advertisement, Joe suggested he run another. He did. After two more weeks of agonized waiting, Joe no longer tried to force Mike to think sensibly. Instead he worried the way Mike did, doubted Helen's honesty, and assaulted the integrity of womankind in general.

"The little fool," Mike said. "She thinks I love it here, love it so much I couldn't bear to leave this place. I think I could kill her, Joe. I really think I could."

"I wouldn't blame you if you did. After seven years, she got used to the idea of your being dead. But don't act hasty, Mike. I've got a suggestion."

"Yeah? What?"

"Give her one warning. If she's at all smart, it won't take long before you get your money."

"You're right. Let's put it down on paper."

With the stub of a pencil he wrote: "Greybeard pining away. If no answer, coming home soon."

Mike returned to the clean-shaven face again. Grimly, he determined to get on his feet, put a little money aside, and ready himself for a trip back to the States. Seven hard, wasted years. Helen would pay for them, but good.

"The scheme was great," Joe said, sitting on his bunk carefully scraping mud off his boots, "but the girl wasn't. If you go back, let me know what happens."

"I told you already," Mike said. "She'll lose every cent. And maybe more than that."

He stood at the yellow encrusted window, looking out at the rutted dirt road. Identical one-room shacks blocked the view of the coffee fields beyond, and above them in the distance was the mountain decapitated

by white, low-hanging clouds. He watched Parker pass the wooden plank walk in front of the house, then saw him stop, reverse, and come toward their door.

"Package for you, Mike," the little man said, blinking behind thick glasses. "It's at the station. You can walk over and get it now, or later."

"Now, man, *now!*" Mike said, and grinned happily at Joe.

When Mike returned to the shack, the brown-wrapped package held tightly in both hands, Joe Bascom was sitting on his bunk, smoking, looking pensive, and holding a shotgun in his lap. It was the same shotgun they used to drive off stray animals.

Joe picked it up as Mike walked in, and sighted down the long barrel.

"Hey," Mike said, grinning uncertainly. "Careful with that."

"Sorry," Joe said apologetically. "I really hate to do this, Mike. But I want the package. Hand it over to me, and we can get this over with."

"What are you talking about?"

Joe looked pained. "Don't make it tough," he pleaded. "We been good friends for a year, Mike, this ain't easy for me. Maybe if I didn't have time to *think* about it, it would have been different. But now I can't think of anything else. Give me the package, Mike."

"You wouldn't," Mike said, shaking his head. "You wouldn't do such a thing, Joe. We've been pals."

The little man made the trigger go click.

"Hurry, Mike," he said in a whisper. "Toss it over. Come on. Leave me have it."

A muscle twitched in the big man's face. Then, convulsively, he lobbed the brown parcel towards Joe. Joe intercepted it with his free hand, and let it drop to the bunk. Then he rose, and came forward. Mike stayed rooted, not knowing what was going to happen next. When he saw Joe Bascom flip the shotgun in his hands, and raise the butt towards his head, there wasn't even time for an outcry. The butt came down with calculated force, landing behind his left ear. He was still conscious when he went to the floor, conscious of the crude wooden planks that composed it, of the scraggly weeds growing up between the cracks, of the footsteps of Joe Bascom heading for the door. Then he blacked out.

When he came to, his head, neck, and shoulders were filled with pain. He went drunkenly out of the bunkhouse and into the compound. There was nobody out in the open. Everybody with sense was hiding from the swollen sun overhead. He finally located Parker, the mailman, and shook

off his questions to ask the one most important to him: Where was Joe Bascom?

"Bascom? He took a jeep into town, maybe half an hour ago."

"You going in now?"

"No. But if you want to borrow the jalopy—"

"Thanks," Mike said grimly, and got behind the wheel.

The Town of Tia Losa wasn't a place to hide: there were only two streets, running parallel to each other, and only half a dozen public places. Mike headed the car towards the American Express office, figuring that Joe's first move would be passage away from Algordo. But the crowd that had gathered around the Palacio Bar & Grill caused him to stomp his foot on the brake and pull the jeep to a halt. He called out in Portuguese to one of the local townsmen, and the man, who knew the Americano from their Saturday night poker games, came to the vehicle and started spouting too many words at once. Mike asked him to speak English, and the man said, "It's your compadre, Mister Mulgrave. Your pal, Joe. He came into the bar with a little package, and go into a back room with a bottle. A minute later, boom."

"Boom? What do you mean?"

The man spread his arms wide. "Big explosion," he said. "Your friend, Joe, he's in little pieces, Mr. Mulgrave. Senor Palacio, he's mad his bar's in pieces." And he grinned a wide grin.

The men coming out of the demolished interior were looking at him curiously, but Mike didn't care. He hopped out of the car and went to the doorway of the bar and grill, and took one long look inside at the powdery mist that filled the air. Then he turned on his heel and went back to the jeep.

A minute later, he was in front of the American Express desk, and the clerk was asking what he wanted.

"A ticket to the States," he said grimly. "For one ghost."

"Pardon?" the clerk said.



Child's Play

by William Link

and Richard Levinson

Camp Summit drowsed in the two o'clock heat. In the cedar cabins little boys lay in their bunks, staring out through screened doors at the lawns and sleeping tennis courts. Breezes stirred in the pines, but moved off toward the tent row and the lake. The boys, dreaming of afternoon triumphs, turned over and over in their bunks, waiting for rest period to end.

Arnold came slowly up the path from the lakefront. He wore khaki shorts and a T-shirt, and his socks and sneakers were dripping wet. His round solemn face, in the open sun, was curiously white.

He entered cabin 12 and sat down on the bunk next to the door. A boy in the back glanced up from his comic book, but said nothing. Another boy, stretched out on his bed, picked up a tennis ball and stared at the newcomer. He watched Arnold kick off his sneakers and socks and change into a new pair of loafers. "You're lucky Uncle Jack isn't here," said the boy with the tennis ball. "You'd catch it for sure if he found out you just came in. You're supposed to stay in the bunk during rest period."

Arnold switched on the Hallicrafter radio set next to his bed and moved the selector band. He slid a pair of earphones over his large ears.

"Where have you been, Arnold?" asked the boy.

Arnold moved the selector band again.

"You can hear me. Those earphones aren't *that* thick. Arnold!" He threw the tennis ball at the little boy, but it hit the bunk ledge and rolled to a stop.

"Shut up," said Arnold.

"Where have you been? On another of your expeditions?"

Arnold adjusted the earphones.

The boy who had thrown the ball rolled over on his back and stared

up at the raftered ceiling. "You don't know everything," he said abruptly. "There's a *lot* you don't know. There's a kid in bunk 7 that knows three times as much as you do. And *his* father works up at Princeton. Arnold?" He looked over at the bed. "What are you listening to?"

Arnold cupped his small hands over the earphones.

"Arnold? What are you listening to?" The boy stared at Arnold for a few more minutes and then lost interest and took a comic book from his trunk. He turned away against the wall.

Arnold switched off the set and put the earphones down. He removed a key from his pocket and opened the trunk at the foot of his bed. It was a green trunk, new and unmarred by labels. Inside was a jumble of crumpled T-shirts and dirty pants; at the bottom, under some luminous white stones and the mechanism of a clock, was a sheaf of stationery. Arnold took out a piece and closed the trunk, locking it carefully. He removed a handful of pencils from his pocket and selected one with a point. Then, using the steel surface of the trunk top, he began to write in a clear, firm hand.

Dear Mother: This is the third time I have written to you this week (and today is only Tuesday). I want to come home. You know that. In your last letter (which I received last Friday) you did not even refer to this subject, even though I told you about it in my last four letters and two postcards. You know why I want to leave here. Father can send Walter up with the car, it is only a five hour drive (I checked). I am quite sure that Mr. Whiteman will refund most of what you paid. Don't bother sending him a letter to find out, as that will waste too much time and complicate things. I want to come home.

(signed) Arnold

He was folding the letter when a bugle call sounded. There was an immediate yelling and shouting, the sound of feet pounding on the lawns. Youngsters raced by outside the cabin, their white shirts flashing against the summer dazzle of the lake. The bugle stopped abruptly, and there remained only the sound of boys' voices raised in the warm wonder of afternoon.

Arnold was left alone in the cabin. He addressed an envelope, slipped the letter inside, and placed it in his back pocket. Then he turned on the

Hallcrafter and adjusted the earphones. He watched a group of boys in bathing suits walking down toward the beach.

"Arnold." A man stood in the doorway. He was short and balding, with a pleasant, tanned face. A whistle dangled at the end of a blue lanyard around his neck. "Arnold. Come on."

Arnold turned the selector band.

"It's activities period," the man said. He came in and stood looking down at the little boy. "Come on, Arnold."

"I don't feel like going."

"You have to. Look, you know what will happen if I tell Mr. Whiteman. He'll dock you your free period. You don't want that to happen, do you?"

"You don't *have* to tell him."

"Yes I do. I let you get away with this before, but I can't this time. Now come on. You've got riflery, and Uncle Paul will be checking on you if you don't show. Arnold?"

The boy hunched his thin shoulders.

"Take those earphones off. You can't hear me."

"Yes I can."

The man wiped his sweaty neck with the front of his shirt. His nose was peeling. He sat down next to the boy on the bunk and tried a different approach.

"What are you listening to on that thing?"

"Radio Moscow."

"Is that so? What are they saying?"

"Lots of things."

"Like what, for example?"

"They claim we're going to have a depression."

"Do you think they're right?"

Arnold frowned and touched his smooth white cheek. "No. There are a lot of reasons why we won't. One is that—"

The man put his hand on his shoulder. "Arnold, will you come with me? If you don't I'll have to tell Mr. Whiteman. Now I mean that. I'm not kidding."

Arnold thought for a moment and then removed the earphones. The cabin was quiet except for the sounds of shouting and splashing from the lake.

"Okay, Uncle Jack," Arnold said to the man. He fingered the letter in his back pocket. "I'll go if you won't tell Mr. Whiteman . . ."

It was cool in the pine forest and the air smelled of summer leaves. A group of campers, with .22 rifles, lay stomach-down on a strip of canvas matting. Their firing sounded flat and ineffectual in the dim grove. After each round a young counselor would walk back to remove the little black and white paper targets from the rack.

Arnold sat in the shadow of a dwarf evergreen, waiting his turn with the second group of boys. He was drawing numbers with a stick in the soft earth.

"Okay. The rest of you guys." The counselor turned a red, critical face to the new group and watched them tumble down on the matting. "And cut out the talk. You can't get a decent score unless you concentrate."

Arnold pressed the heavy rifle to his shoulder. The counselor stood beside him, his black moccasins almost touching the little boy's legs.

"Now concentrate."

The others began firing. Arnold yawned, closed his left eye, and pulled the trigger. He loaded and fired six times, and each bullet sang off into the dark underbrush.

"What are you doing?" cried the counselor. His foot pinned Arnold's rifle to the matting. "What's wrong with you? You didn't even have your barrel pointing at the target."

Arnold said nothing. He leaned his head on his elbow. The other boys stared at him.

"Didn't I teach you how to fire?" asked the counselor. "You squeeze the trigger. Sque-e-eze it. And you hold your breath. Didn't I teach you that?"

Arnold watched an ant cross a long gully in the matting.

"What's your name?" He waited for an answer.

"His name's Arnold," said one of the boys.

"Can't he talk for himself?"

"Can he talk?" said another boy. "You should hear him sometimes." The little boys snickered. A few threw stones into the bright sky.

The counselor bent down and tried to get Arnold's attention. "So you're Arnold. Well I've been told about you."

Arnold lowered his eyes and puckered his lips as if to whistle.

"You've got the idea that you can do whatever you want around here. Well, not with me. Pick up that rifle."

Arnold watched the ant. The other boys were silent.

"I told you to pick it up," said the counselor.

Arnold looked at him. "I'm through using the rifle," he said.
"You're *what*?"

"Through using the rifle."

The other boys giggled.

"You're getting out of this period," said the counselor. "Right now. You go find Mr. Whiteman and tell him that I don't want you here with the rest of us. Tell him he'll have to reassign you to volleyball or arts and crafts. I'm certainly not going to bother with you."

Arnold got up.

"Do you hear me? Go tell Mr. Whiteman that. I'll check with him tonight to make sure you did."

Arnold turned his back and walked out of the clearing. He was on the path before the others began to talk. Then the rifles sounded again and frightened birds fluttered in the underbrush. He walked very slowly with his chin pressed down on his chest, his body swaying.

Soon he was out of the forest and standing on a grassy hill that overlooked the shining ring of beach and lake. There was a group of campers already there, including two of Arnold's bunkmates.

"Arnold!" called one of the campers.

The small boy came over.

"You're supposed to know everything," said the camper. "What's going on down there?"

Arnold looked. There were three automobiles and an ambulance parked in the shimmering sand. A few state policemen were walking out near the dock, and Mr. Whiteman was talking to another on the deserted beach.

"They won't let anybody down there," said the camper.

"They say we all have to go back to our bunks," cried a boy with glasses.
"I think somebody was hurt."

"Did *you* hear anything?" asked the camper.

"No," said Arnold. He stood silently watching the activity on the beach and then turned abruptly in the direction of his bunk.

When he entered, the boys were waiting in line to take showers in the cramped bathroom. Uncle Jack wasn't around. Arnold opened his trunk, took out a book, and began reading. The campers were talking excitedly in the showers, and steam poured through the canvas doorway. When they were finished they came out, wrapped in towels, and padded over to the front porch. They stood there in dripping groups, staring off

through the clearing at the lake. Arnold continued to read.

Before dinner the campers usually gathered by the administration building for the lowering of the flag. Mr. Whiteman would tell them the evening's activities and read any necessary announcements. Tonight the ceremony had been called off, and the boys went directly to the dining hall from their bunks. Arnold had changed his clothes, and he strolled along the gravel path behind the others. On the steps of the old building he noticed a stone that gleamed in the fading sunlight. He picked it up and placed it in his pocket.

When he got inside he went slowly over to the mail table, where all late afternoon mail was stacked according to bunks. He shuffled through the Bunk 12 pile, but there were no letters for him. Angrily, he swept the other envelopes to the floor and went over to his table. Uncle Jack was sitting at its head, his peeling face disturbed. He still wore the same sportshirt, and there were dark perspiration stains at the armpits.

"Sit down, Arnold, you're late," he said.

Arnold took his seat. He glanced at Mr. Whiteman's table across the crowded, noisy room. The camp owner sat with three other men, and they were talking quietly. Arnold looked down at his grapefruit and attacked it with his spoon.

One of the little boys, who had been lost in thought at the other end of the table, suddenly said in a loud clear voice, "Uncle Jack. What happened to Bobby Thompson? He drowned, didn't he?"

The large room was suddenly still. Mr. Whiteman and the three men glanced up. Uncle Jack frowned and waited for the rumble of conversation to begin again before he answered. "Keep your voice down, Teddy. I can hear you."

"But what happened, Uncle Jack? He's not here for dinner tonight, and one of the guys in his bunk told me—"

The counselor interrupted him. "Bobby Thompson had an accident, that's all. Mr. Whiteman will tell you all about it in the morning."

"I'll bet he's dead," said another boy, heaping sugar on his grapefruit. "I heard they found him after rest period underneath the old docks up the lake."

"Now where did you hear a thing like that?" Uncle Jack tried a tentative smile. "The way foolish rumors spread around here. You boys dream up the wildest stories."

"It is *not* a wild story," said the boy stoutly. "Why would the cops be

up here if something wasn't wrong? He's dead, all right."

"Maybe he was killed or something," another camper volunteered timidly.

"It was an accident," said Uncle Jack. "A simple accident. The police always come when there's an accident. Now I don't want to hear any more about it."

"Bobby was in Bunk 9, wasn't he?" somebody whispered to Arnold. "Uncle Paul's the head of that bunk, maybe he did it. Nobody likes Uncle Paul anyway. I wish they'd put him in jail."

Arnold shrugged and buttered a piece of bread.

Dinner progressed and the big room throbbed with high, young voices and the crash of silverware. A waiter dropped his tray and it rattled like a coin on the floor. His tables laughed and applauded. Someone near the windows began to sing, "*Oh, the Deacon went down . . .*" The song caught on, moving from table to table across the warm room. But the old verses failed to bring the usual enthusiasm, and the song died before it reached the head counselors' table. Mr. Whiteman got up, his eyes lowered, and left the room.

Arnold ate slowly, finishing a second plate of ice cream after most of his bunkmates had been excused. Uncle Paul came over and stopped beside the table.

"Hello, Paul," said Uncle Jack, mopping his mouth with a napkin. "What's up?"

The counselor frowned. "I had a little difficulty with this boy here on the rifle range today," he said, indicating Arnold. "He was causing trouble."

"Is that true, Arnold?" asked Uncle Jack.

Arnold licked his spoon carefully.

Uncle Paul shook his head. "His attitude is uncooperative. I sent him down to talk to Whiteman. Did he go?"

"Did you, Arnold?"

"No," said the little boy.

"Why not?" snapped Uncle Paul. "I told you to see him."

"I don't want to talk to him," said Arnold slowly.

"You're going to have to learn, fella, that you don't always do what you want."

Uncle Jack's face grew stern. "Arnold, go over to the office and see Mr. Whiteman right now. You'll probably catch him in. Then report to

me after you see him."

"I don't want to talk to him. I already told you that."

"Maybe he'd better not, at least not tonight," said Uncle Paul. "Whiteman's got enough on his mind since this afternoon. Arnold can see him tomorrow."

"No, I want him to go tonight. Whiteman wants to see him sometime this week anyway. Now you go ahead, Arnold, and no back talk."

Arnold started to say something, but the two men did not seem in the mood for arguments. He slid back his chair. "Okay," he said. "But if any Special Delivery mail comes for me tonight, let me know about it." He got up and walked over to the door.

A light burned in the office of the administration building as Arnold came up the path. The place was constructed of white wood with mildewed window flaps that could be lowered in case of rain. It sat back near the clearing at the edge of the rippled lake, and Arnold could hear the cold waters sucking against the sides of discarded rowboats. He shivered a little as the night wind whipped along the path and pressed at his thin jacket. Off in the distance, orange lights went on in the recreation hall.

Arnold pushed quietly through the screen door and stood still in the room's mild darkness. Mr. Whiteman sat behind a desk, talking on the telephone. Arnold went over to a high bookcase near a row of filing cabinets and scanned the titles. He slid out one of the books and began paging through it:

Mr. Whiteman hung up the phone and swung around in his chair. "Oh, hello, Arnold," he said. "I didn't hear you come in." He was a tall, heavy man, with a brown face and short white hair.

Arnold put the book back and approached the circle of light on the desk.

"What were you reading, son?"

"*The Psychology of Children*, by Klarmann," said the boy.

"Oh, yes. That thing's been kicking around this office for years."

"It's a new book," said Arnold. "You probably just got it this season."

Mr. Whiteman tilted back in his chair and looked at the boy. He took a pipe from a desk rack and tapped it on his palm.

"Well sit down, son. You want a Coke or something? Some soda?"

Arnold shook his head. "I just ate a little while ago."

Mr. Whiteman packed the pipe from a small pouch and lit it. He puffed vigorously for a moment, then settled back even further in his chair. "What's the problem, Arnold? What can I do for you?"

"Uncle Paul and Uncle Jack told me to see you. Uncle Paul is mad at me because I didn't listen to him on the rifle range this afternoon."

"Well why didn't you, son? After all, he's your instructor."

"He doesn't like me."

Mr. Whiteman laughed comfortably. "Of course he likes you. Why that's downright silly, Arnold. Uncle Paul likes all of the campers."

The little boy was silent.

"Now come on, Arnold. You don't actually believe that any of the counselors has anything against you. Do you?"

Arnold looked up, his small eyes momentarily alive in the glow of the desk lamp. "My mother's been writing you, hasn't she?"

"What's that?"

"She won't answer my letters because she wants to keep me here. But she's been writing to you."

Mr. Whiteman expelled a long sigh. He pressed his finger tips against the edge of the desk. "Maybe we'd better have a real talk, eh, son? Now I'm going to level with you, and I expect you to be honest with me. Your mother *has* written to me. She said you're unhappy here. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Well why, Arnold? You're here for a vacation, to have a good time. Why don't you like it?"

Arnold compressed his lips and remained silent.

"Is it because the other boys don't understand you? Is that it? Frankly, son, we would have put you into an advanced bunk, but we didn't think you'd enjoy yourself there."

Arnold toyed with the zipper on his jacket, sliding it up and down.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Arnold. I've been checking with your counselor and some of the campers. I understand that you're being given a rough time. I heard that somebody cut all the strings off your tennis racket." Arnold nodded. "And I also know that somebody stole a tube from your radio set."

"I got it back." The boy's thin fingers snapped the zipper along its grooved track.

"That's not the point. If you're being bothered, I want to know about it. You should have come and told me these things." Mr. Whiteman's

pipe had gone out and he relit it impatiently. "Now who's behind this, Arnold? Are they boys in your bunk?"

"No."

"How many are there? I can dock them their free period if they give you any more trouble."

"Only one boy's been bothering me, and you don't have to do anything."

"Look, Arnold," said Mr. Whiteman earnestly, "I'm not asking you to tell tales or anything. I just want to make things better for you. Your mother's been very concerned about your welfare, and I want to be able to tell her that you're getting along."

"Can I have a Coke now?" asked Arnold.

Mr. Whiteman frowned and went over to a small refrigerator. He removed a bottle, opened it, and handed it to Arnold. Then he sat down, rather wearily. "Now I'd like to know the name of the boy who's been picking on you. Arnold?" Arnold wiped off the top of the bottle and drank the Coke slowly. "Tell me, Arnold."

Arnold rolled the bottle between his hands. "It's not important now."

"Tell me."

"Okay. It was Bobby Thompson."

Mr. Whiteman paled. "Did you . . . say Bobby Thompson was the boy who was giving you trouble?"

"Yes."

Mr. Whiteman stood up very carefully and moved around the desk. He pulled on his coat. "I want you to stay here for a few minutes, Arnold." His voice was uneven. "I want you to stay right here. Promise me that. I just have to see somebody for a minute."

Arnold put the bottle on the floor. "Okay," he said.

"Read that book you were looking at. I'll be right back. All right?" He went over to the door and looked back at the boy. Then he left. Arnold heard him begin to run as soon as he reached the gravel path.

The little boy stood up. He wandered around the room, his hands in his pockets, then went over to the desk. He sat down in Mr. Whiteman's chair, opened a drawer, and took out some stationery. He uncapped a fountain pen and began to write on the creamy paper.

Dear Mother:

This is the last time I'm going to write unless I hear from you. I want to come home . . .

Just a Little Impractical Joke

by Richard Stark

Harry Chesterton, murderer, surveyed the scene of carnage. Everything was in place, everything was right. Miriam lay sprawled on her tummy on the bathroom floor, her head under the sink. The bathmat, the towel, the soap and washcloth and loofah, all were in position. The red-stained scissors lay on the floor near Miriam's right elbow. The bread knife was clutched in Miriam's right hand.

Perfect. Everything was perfect.

Harry nodded in satisfaction and stepped out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He walked down the hall to the master bedroom, removed his clothing, donned his terrycloth robe, and whistled his way back to the bathroom. He turned his face toward the kitchen. "Don't run water for a few minutes, Miriam!" he shouted, loud enough to be heard by any neighbor in a backyard or next to an open window. "I'm going to take a shower now!"

He nodded again, whistled some more, and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind him again. He stepped over Miriam, who was in the same position, bleeding quietly on the floor, and removed his robe. He turned on the shower, adjusted the flow to the force and temperature he wanted, and stepped into the tub, pulling the shower curtain closed behind him. He lathered briskly, and burst into song.

He was happy, deliriously happy. After three years of careful planning, of working on and rejecting scheme after scheme after scheme, Harry Chesterton had finally found the one absolutely foolproof way to murder his wife.

Foolproof, it was foolproof. And now Miriam was dead. After a decent interval of mourning—a safe interval—he would marry dear sweet Cathy, who would never, never, never turn into the shrill nag that Miriam had become in seven years of marriage. "When are you going to settle down, Harry? When are you going to give up these get-rich-quick schemes of

yours and find a decent job, Harry? The department store called again about the payments on the furniture, Harry; they say they're going to take it away. What are you going to do about *that*, Harry? You're just lucky your schemes haven't landed you in jail, Harry, lucky, that's all I have to say."

How accurate. That was all she had to say. Over and over and over again, that was all Miriam had to say. Nag, nag, nag. How could a man concentrate on his ambitions and plans and prospects with a nagging wife hounding him all the time?

He couldn't, that was all, he just couldn't.

It would be different with Cathy. Cathy believed in him, that was the important thing. Cathy would stand behind him, help him in countless ways. Why, the very fact that she was the daughter of a man who owned thirty-seven percent of National Atronics and was chairman of that company's board of directors was helpful. That very fact alone.

Harry wielded the loofah and sang lustily of moon and June, while dreaming of Long Island estates, vacations on the Riviera, Porsches, and Mercedes-Benzes . . .

His leisurely shower done, Harry shut the water off and stepped from the tub. He was a tall, lithe, well-muscled young man of thirty-two, who didn't look a day over thirty-one. He now sat down next to the sink and surveyed the three clipped toenails on his right foot. He had cut those earlier in the day, since the scissors would not be available for use at this stage of the proceedings.

Planning, that was all it took. Careful planning.

All at once, he shouted, "*Miriam!*" at the top of his voice, and thumped both bare feet against the floor. Then he stood, left the bathroom, and lay down on his stomach on the hall rug. He did twelve fast push-ups and, completely out of breath, got to his feet again and staggered nude to the living room. He grabbed for the phone, and dialed the operator. "Operator!" he cried, gasping a bit. "An ambulance! The police! I—I've killed my wife!"

The house was absolutely full of people. There were people with cameras and pieces of chalk and black bags crammed into the bathroom. There were uniformed policemen by the front door, and more uniformed policemen in the living room. There were two detectives in civilian clothing in the kitchen, talking to Mr. and Mrs. Anderson from down-

stairs. There were reporters all over the sidewalk and front lawn and first floor porch, kept by firm silent policemen from rushing up to the second-floor flat, where the terrible accident had taken place.

And there was a detective named Hotchkiss in the bedroom, listening to the rattled, grief-stricken, and totally inconsolable husband tell his story for the seventh time.

"It was just a joke," Harry was saying. He lit a new cigarette from the butt of the old and nervously stubbed the butt into an ashtray. He was sitting distractedly on the edge of the bed, dressed again in the terrycloth robe, his black hair now dry, but terribly uncombed. He had made the phone call at just a few minutes after four, and now it was well after eight. Over four hours, and he was still telling his story.

"A joke," echoed Detective Hotchkiss. He was short and stocky, with a roundish heavy-jowled face and sad beagle eyes. His suit was gray and rumpled, his shoes black and scuffed, his tie blue and wrinkled. He wasn't a very prepossessing figure.

"I'm sure it was," said Harry emotionally. He dragged on the cigarette. "I can't believe she really *meant* to . . ." He let the sentence trail away, and shook his head in apparent agitation.

"You saw this movie last night, is that right?" asked Detective Hotchkiss.

"Yes. Like I've told you, it was all about a homicidal maniac, and a woman was brutally stabbed to death in a shower. We talked about it on the way home last night, joking about how neither of us would dare take a shower for months. We—it was just last night, and we were laughing together, we—"

"All right, Mr. Chesterton," said Hotchkiss. "Take it easy."

"Yes," said Harry. "Thank you. Yes. Anyway, today, when I told Miriam I was going to take a shower, she joked about it again, she—she said she couldn't see how I had the nerve."

"Those were her exact words?"

"I—yes, I—I'm not sure. She said something about that, she—" Harry pressed a trembling hand to his forehead. "I'm no longer sure of anything," he said brokenly.

"Yes. I understand." Detective Hotchkiss, behind a perfunctory sympathy, was watchful and expressionless. "What happened next?" he asked.

"Well, I showered, and then I was sitting clipping my toenails, when she came in, wi-with the knife. Brandishing the knife. It was—it was just

like in the movie last night."

"A practical joke, is that it?" said Hotchkiss.

"It *must* have been. But then—at the time—it was so sudden, and so startling—"

"You reacted instinctively, is that it?"

"Yes, that's it. I jumped to my feet and—well, I was holding the scissors, and—"

"You stabbed her," said Hotchkiss unemotionally.

Harry winced. "Yes. I stabbed her."

"I see." Hotchkiss solemnly surveyed the lack of crease in his right trouser leg. "Did your wife go in for practical jokes often, Mr. Chesterton?"

Harry was ready for that question. The obvious answer was to say yes, that she did such things all the time. But that would have given the whole thing away. In the first place, the police would have reasoned that Harry might have expected some such stunt from his wife, and a murderous shock reaction would be inexplicable. In the second place, it wouldn't take much questioning of friends and relatives to determine that Miriam was anything but a jester. A more sour, stolid, down-to-earth type couldn't be imagined.

So he said, "No, not really. That was what made it so startling. Oh, once in awhile, I suppose. We've both kidded with one another from time to time."

"I see," said Hotchkiss. "One more thing. The scissors. They weren't the usual nail-clipping style of scissors, they were much larger than that. If they'd been nail-clipping scissors—"

"Yes, I know," said Harry sorrowfully, nodding his head. "Miriam would still be alive. But my wife—well, you know how women are about tools, never using the right tools for the right job. Miriam—well, she was that way. She's used scissors for screwdrivers, pliers, hammers, all sorts of jobs for which they weren't intended. That pair of scissors is the last in the house, that's why I was using them."

That part was the truth. That had been another of Miriam's irritating habits—a minor irritation, compared to the rest, but an irritation nonetheless, like her insistence upon squeezing the middle of the toothpaste tube—and practically all of the tools in his basement workshop bore the scars of her usage.

There was a bump-bump from the hall, and Harry dropped the cigarette

in alarm. Stooping to pick it up before it could burn the unpaid-for rug, he said, "What's that?"

"I imagine they're taking your wife away," said Hotchkiss.

"Oh."

Harry fumblingly lit a new cigarette. His nervousness was only partially an act. It was one thing to plan something like this, work out the details as Harry had worked them out. It was something else entirely to be actually in the middle of the plan, the Rubicon having been crossed, the die having been cast, the wife having been launched into eternity and the house being full of policemen. Something else entirely. No matter how sure he was of his plan, its execution was still nerve-wracking.

But the plan was foolproof, no matter how watchful this detective was. Why shouldn't it be? It had the impromptu idiocy of truth. Who would expect a man to murder his wife in cold blood, with such a completely inane cover-up story? The inanity of the thing was what saved it.

Hotchkiss got to his feet. "I guess that's it for tonight," he said. "I know you're still upset. But I'd like you to come in tomorrow and dictate a statement. Do you know where headquarters is?"

"I think so," said Harry. "Across the street from the Strand Theater, isn't it?"

"Right. Is there anyone you'd like us to call? To stay with you?"

"No," said Harry. "That's all right. I'll take a pill, I guess. I think I'd just rather be alone for awhile."

"All right; then," said Hotchkiss. "And you come on down to the station tomorrow, and dictate a statement. Ask for me at the desk—Hotchkiss."

"I'll do that," Harry promised.

Hotchkiss paused in the doorway. "Don't plan any extended trips for a while," he said.

"Of course not," said Harry.

It was a lovely morning. Spring it was, dripping with sunshine, the grass all about as green as an Irishman on March seventeenth. Birds were singing, too. All in all, a lovely morning.

Harry got up at nine-thirty. He wouldn't have awakened then, except the boss called to make inquiry as to his whereabouts. For the last couple of months, while waiting for various really big prospects to break one way or the other, Harry had worked for Smiling Stanley's Guaranteed Used Cars, as a commission salesman. And Smiling Stanley now called at nine-

thirty in the morning, wondering just where in hell Harry was.

"I'm in bed," Harry told him.

And precisely what, Smiling Stanley wanted to know, did he think he was doing in bed?

"Sleeping," Harry told him.

And did Harry know, Smiling Stanley snarled, just what time it was?

Harry checked the alarm clock. "Nine-thirty," he said.

Then just why, roared Smiling Stanley, wasn't Harry at work?

"Because," Harry told him evenly, "my wife passed away last night. Don't you ever read the papers?"

Smiling Stanley didn't say a word.

Harry said, "Hello?"

Smiling Stanley sort of choked.

"All right, then," said Harry, and he returned the phone to its cradle. He smiled a bit at the telephone, looked at the emptiness in the bed beside him and smiled, looked out the window at the green and sunny spring, and smiled.

What a lovely morning!

He scrunched down beneath the covers. The whole bed to himself! He closed his eyes and composed himself for sleep.

But he couldn't get back to sleep. No matter how lovely the morning, no matter how delicious it was to have the whole bed to himself, no matter how charming the notion that no nagging harridan was going to come bursting in from the kitchen wanting to know when he was going to drag his lazy self out of bed and go earn an honest dollar, no matter how delightful all of life had suddenly become, Harry couldn't go to sleep.

He couldn't go to sleep, because the morning paper was on the front porch.

He just had to get up and read his press notices, right away.

He quit the bed at last, and donned his robe, glancing at himself in the full-length mirror on the closet door. Yes sir, he was a fine figure of a man. A fine *happy* figure of a man. He beamed at himself, sparkle-toothed.

"Cathy," he whispered, "you are a lucky little girl."

Should he call her? No, not yet, wait a few days anyway. No sense doing something stupid at this point in the game, exciting anyone's suspicions.

Harry walked through the house to the front door, and down the stairs

to the porch. The newspaper was there, and so were two full quarts of milk, homogenized grade A. The newspaper had been folded by the delivery boy, for better throwing, and Harry tucked it under his arm still folded, putting off the lovely moment when he would read about himself, with all the gory details. He picked up the milk bottles, closed the front door, and went scuffing back upstairs in his old slippers.

The milk in the refrigerator, a cup of steaming coffee on the kitchen table, Harry at last sat down and opened the paper.

He wasn't on the first page, or the second page, or the third. He was frowning, just about convinced that he hadn't made the paper at all, when finally he found the headline, on the first page of the second section. Of course. Naturally. The first section was international news—FAR EAST CRISIS—and the second section was local news.

WOMAN SLAIN IN PRACTICAL JOKE

Mrs. Miriam Chesterton, of 148 Coleridge Drive, was reported slain yesterday afternoon, the bizarre climax of a bizarre practical joke. According to her husband, Harry Chesterton, the good-looking Mrs. Chesterton played an unfortunate practical joke, the result of a motion picture she had seen only the night before, a joke which ended in her tragic death.

According to the grieving husband, stunned by this fantastic turn of events . . .

It was absolutely the most amusing thing Harry had ever read in his entire life. He read the item three times, all the way through, and then he went to get a pair of scissors to clip it out of the paper. I'll start a scrapbook, he thought to himself.

After five minutes of fruitless search, he suddenly remembered that the last pair of scissors in the house had gone out the night before, embedded in Miriam.

He was in the process of carefully sawing the article free with a razor blade when the urge to call Cathy came over him once again.

But that would be idiocy. In the first place, he had, of course, never told her about his plan. No matter how much she loved him, he didn't want to test her feelings quite that far. She might, if she knew the truth, be somewhat loath to pledge her troth with him. No woman could feel

completely at ease with her husband, if she knew for a fact that he had hastened her predecessor's journey to the desk of Saint Peter.

Besides which, Cathy, when all was said and done, just wasn't very bright. She wasn't exactly the type who could be trusted with a secret of such import. No, she just wasn't the smartest girl in the world.

But, oh, was she rich! Or, at least, she was going to be rich, when her old man kicked the bucket.

In a year or two, given the right circumstances, perhaps he could figure out a little something for the old man, too. The thought had never occurred to him before, but now it did, and he rather liked it. What was real creativity on his part, Miriam always called schemes. And he did seem to have a special knack for murder.

In the meantime, of course, Cathy had to be kept completely out of the picture, as she had been up till now. Detective Hotchkiss could entertain vague suspicions, but until he was given some item of proof or of motive, that was all he could do.

Cathy would be kept out of sight until all this blew over and was forgotten. And then—marriage.

This thought through, Harry finished sawing out the clipping and went whistling toward the bedroom. He suddenly stopped whistling when he remembered the Andersons, downstairs. Lord knew if they could hear whistling from upstairs, but just to be on the safe side he should content himself with silent smiles while at home.

Well, it wouldn't be for much longer. Soon, he would say farewell forever to this cheap, grubby kind of life. No more living in two-family houses, no more having to take the bus downtown, no more having to con suspicious yokels into buying junky automobiles. And Harry knew that at Smiling Stanley's, the bribe paid to obtain the state inspection tag was a normal part of the overhead.

But that was all behind him now—or almost behind him. Ahead of him awaited yachts, and private estates, and maybe even a cute French upstairs maid . . .

Reflecting on these happy thoughts, Harry entered the bedroom and laid the clipping lovingly on the dresser. This afternoon, he decided, while he was downtown, he would have to buy a scrapbook.

He went back to the kitchen, found the remains of his coffee stone cold, and decided to make himself a new cup. Then he thought it might be a nice idea to have an entire meal—five or six eggs and lots of bacon

and piece after piece of toast—because it was the kind of day that deserved a good breakfast.

It was a *lovely* day.

He got to the police station shortly after noon, and it was a breeze. The only troublesome part was the waiting. He kept having to wait for people, and then someone would come along and explain some legal point to him or some such thing, and he would nod, and then he would wait some more. But, finally, a male stenographer appeared, pencil and notebook at the ready, and took down in shorthand Harry's story of the killing. Then there was some more waiting, while the statement was typed—with millions of carbons—and then he signed all the copies of the statement and left the police station, with writer's cramp.

It was almost five o'clock, he discovered, and the bus stop was crowded with people waiting to go home. Every bus left the corner groaning with its overload of standees. The sidewalks were jammed with rushing humanity, most of it female and most of it vicious.

To be buffeted about by this rush-hour crowd, Harry felt, was just too much. Here he was on the verge of a life of leisure, and he was going to have to stand up all the way home on a bus.

No, he wasn't, either. He'd just stay downtown until the rush hour was over. He wanted to buy a scrapbook, anyway.

Harry headed for the five-and-dime 'at once. He bought his scrapbook there—a lovely thing, blood red, with "Memories" engraved on the cover in sentimental script—and left with it beneath his arm.

He deserved a drink, he told himself. He hadn't had a thing to drink since yesterday.

He *deserved* a drink.

At the same time, he wondered if it would look good for the so-recently-bereaved husband to be tilting a few at the bar? Some people might give him the benefit of the doubt, say it was simply a case of a grieving husband drowning his sorrows, but others, of a coarser nature, might get the idea it was a not-so-grief-stricken husband tasting freedom.

So Harry compromised. He went for a drink, but he went into a bar that had never seen his face before, one way down by the railroad depot, and with a filthy window and a surly bartender and a bar half-full of sozzled regulars who probably hadn't seen a newspaper since V-J Day.

There was a certain ironic sweetness in being in this particular bar.

Here were the dregs of humanity, in their natural habitat. And here was Harry Chesterton, on his way from middle-class insecurity to upper-class wealth, stopping off in this lower-class dump to hoist a few before moving on. It kind of gave him a sense of history.

Sense of history or no, he wasn't prepared to stand cheek-by-jowl with the bums at the bar. He got a bottle of beer and a not-too-clean glass from the surly bartender, and sat down in the last booth to the back, on the side wall across from the bar. He drank out of the bottle, leaving the not-too-clean glass alone.

He sat facing the back wall, the high top of the booth shielding him from the view of anyone in the street and all but one of the loungers at the bar. That one lounger was leaning against the wall at the end-curve of the bar. Harry glanced at him, recognized the man's type, and looked immediately away.

He didn't like the type. A stocky, large-faced, ham-handed individual in work pants and flannel shirt and brown leather truck-driver's jacket. He was the only one in the bar making any noise at all. He was bellowing a joke of some sort at the surly bartender, who was ignoring him. It wasn't that he was drunk; in fact, he seemed to be nearly sober. He was just one of the loud, crass braggarts and bullies of this world.

Harry knew the type. Braggarts and bullies. It reminded him of grammar school, when people like that yowling Neanderthal over there used to beat him up and make fun of him because he always managed to get good grades and always tried to get in good with the teachers.

It was the loud vicious type who had made his childhood difficult, and had later worsened his lot during his compulsory two years of goldbricking in the Army. On various jobs, he had run into loud qafs like this one, who thought their strength of arm made them superior to their intellectual peers.

The bully in question came to the end of his joke at last, and silence descended on the bar. Blessed silence. Harry glanced up again, and looked quickly away.

The man was looking at him. Staring at him. Studying him.

Oh no, thought Harry, oh no. He sees the clothing I'm wearing, he sees my face, he knows me for the bullyable type. If only he'll leave me alone.

Memories of childhood, of the Army, flashed through Harry's mind. He drank from the beer bottle, and chanced another look.

The man was still studying him, frowning in ludicrous concentration. All at once, he snapped his fingers, and cried, "Ah hah!"

Harry, baffled and frightened, looked quickly away again.

But the man was not to be put off. He left his bar-stool and came striding over to the table. And, of course, none of the other people in the bar paid him the slightest attention. Not that any of them would come to Harry's aid, anyway.

The man loomed over Harry and growled, "Ain't you the two-bit chiseler works for Smiling Stanley?"

Harry looked up in surprise, and all at once recognized the man. Of course, he remembered him now. A railroad worker. Harry, three or four weeks ago, had sold him a little old junkheap that practically ran on rubber bands.

Harry replied unhesitatingly, "No, I'm not."

"Yes; you are," insisted the man. "You're the chiseler works for Smiling Stanley."

"No, I'm not," said Harry again.

"You calling me a liar," said the man. He reached fumblingly into his pocket. "I've got you *now*, you so-and-so!" he yelled, and withdrew from his pocket a small gun, which he pointed directly at Harry's left eye.

Detective Hotchkiss was being patient. "Twice in a row, Mister Chesterton?" he said, and his whole tone implied that twice in a row was rather too much.

They were at a different booth in the same bar. Harry, absolutely panic-stricken, babbled, "How did I know? He pointed the gun at me—"

"And you slammed him with the beer bottle," said Detective Hotchkiss.

"How'd I know it was just a joke? He didn't *act* as though it was just a joke."

Two men carrying a large wicker basket went by, and the basket bumped the table. Harry looked at it in terror. Then it went on by and out the front door, and Harry looked back at Detective Hotchkiss. Detective Hotchkiss had the gun in his hand. He pulled the trigger. A little section in the top of the gun snapped open, and flame came out.

It was a cigarette lighter.

Detective Hotchkiss released the trigger, which closed the section in the top and snuffed out the flame. He put the lighter down on the table between them, and studied it.

"Does that thing *look* like a real gun, Mister Chesterton?"

"It all happened so *fast*," wailed Harry. "Ask the other people in here, ask them if he didn't—"

Detective Hotchkiss shook his head. "None of them were paying any attention at all," he said.

"But that's the way it *happened!*" cried Harry.

Detective Hotchkiss sighed. "Twice in a row," he said. "Who was he, Chesterton?"

"Just a man I'd sold a car to," said Harry. "He acted as though he was mad at me because of the car."

"Of course," said Detective Hotchkiss. "Of course, Chesterton. And did this gentleman—what was his name, by the way?"

"I don't know," said Harry. "I don't remember."

"I see. At any rate, did he by any chance know your wife? Your *late* wife, I mean."

"Know my *wife*?" Great heavens, what was the man thinking? "Of course not! How could he know my wife?"

Detective Hotchkiss shook his head. "I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "This changes the picture. Now, if there were any reason why you might have wanted this gentleman dead, or if there were any reason why you might have wanted your wife dead—"

"He came at me so *fast*!" wailed Harry.

"Yes, yes, of course. But if there were, perhaps, a motive of some sort, something you haven't as yet told us—"

"There's nothing!" cried Harry. "Nothing!"

Detective Hotchkiss got to his feet. "Perhaps," he said, "you ought to come on back to the station with me. I think we have to talk."

They talked for fourteen hours before Harry mentioned Cathy.



To the Manner Born

by Mary Braund

He knew he was absurdly early, and was half surprised to find the doorkeeper in his cubbyhole just beyond the open stage door.

The man looked up from the *Evening News*, screwing his eyes against the light and the smoke from his cigarette. He rose from his cushioned chair to peer at him over the ledge. "Ain't nobody here yet," he said; his manner slightly truculent, then he gave a second look and put his knuckles to his forehead in a half salute.

"Oh, it's Mr. Masters, ain't it? You're a bit beforehand, sir." He leaned his elbows on the ledge and closed one eye in a knowing wink. "Got a touch of the old first-night nerves, then?"

Richard forced a smile. "I suppose so," he began, and was alarmed to find his voice higher than normal and definitely hoarse. He cleared his throat hastily. *Keep calm now.*

He realized this was the first time he had spoken to anyone for several hours, not since they had been sent home this morning after the last brief run-through of a couple of scenes. "Go home now," Joe Taylor, the producer had said. "Go home and forget all about the bloody play until tonight."

Richard had gone back to his digs, but he had not forgotten about the play. He had lain on his bed, gazing at the ceiling, going over and over his lines, wondering again at his luck in getting this part, praying that he would not muffle his chance. The tension had finally become too great, and he had escaped to the theater, arriving hours before he should have.

Richard stared back at the doorkeeper, trying to recall his name. Briggs, that was it. At least he could remember that. But his lines? What about his lines?

He cleared his throat again. "Thought I'd get changed in peace and quiet, before the place gets too crowded. Help me get into the feel of things, you know."

Briggs shook his head. "If you take my advice, and I've seen some new ones in my time, I'd go across the road to the Unicorn and get myself a little drop of the hard stuff. Just a drop, mind you." He turned his head to look at the wall clock.

"Though I reckon you're even too early for their opening time. Tell you what," he said, "I'll get the callboy to bring you along a nice cup of char as soon as he gets here. Shouldn't be long now."

"Thanks," Richard said, "but I don't drink tea. You couldn't make that a cup of coffee, could you?"

"Don't drink tea?" The astonishment was ill-disguised. "Oh, that's right," he said, shaking a nicotine-stained finger at Richard. "You're an American, aren't you? Don't sound like it; I must say."

Richard smiled, knowing this was a commendation. "They knocked that out of me at RADA."

Paul, in Elocution, had taken him in hand. "A touch of Albert Finney they'll stand nowadays, and you can get away with your Welsh or Irish, but Southern Yankee they'll never take." Richard had not tried to explain that Southern and Yankee were contradictions, or that in any case he was neither. He had merely been grateful for the smoothing of his vowels and the softening of the hard nasal tones that he had not been aware of in drama school back home.

Richard flipped a hand at Briggs and walked down the narrow, chilly corridor to the dressing rooms. No, he had not been sorry to slough off his American background. When the head of drama at the university back in the States, a tall, gentle, sad Englishman, had suggested that he try for a place at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts in London, he, Richard Masters, had leaped eagerly. He had always wanted to come to England. Eighteenth-century England—the wit, the elegance, and the beauty—that was what he had dreamed of in the flat world of the Midwest.

Now, here he was, in this eighteenth-century theater, the oldest theater in England, where Edmund Keane and Mrs. Siddons had played. The best repertory in the whole of England, and he, Richard Masters, was playing Joseph Surface in *The School for Scandal*. A lead, no less, in an eighteenth-century comedy of manners. He wanted, suddenly, to laugh aloud with delight.

His qualms were gone, just as he had hoped they might, and now he couldn't wait to change into his costume and get his makeup on. He wanted to be rid of his twentieth-century skin.

Thirty minutes later, he was gazing at himself in the mirror with satisfaction. The clothes became him, no doubt of that. Cream silk knee breeches and stockings, pale green waistcoat embroidered in gold, and a dark green velvet coat with gold buttons. The ruffles of the shirt stood up at his neck, fell around his wrists. A short, powdered wig covered his fair hair and the heels of his buckled shoes made him seem taller than his six feet.

The bright, shadowless mirror threw back the dazzling reflection, and it was no longer Richard Masters standing there, but Joseph Surface, Sheridan's "sentimental knave."

He paused for a moment, absorbed in his other self, the face pale without makeup in the over-bright glass; then with an abrupt movement he picked up the green cocked hat and the gold-knobbed cane and stepped out of the dressing room into the dimness of the corridor.

The theater and the stage were in darkness, but he moved easily out from the wings onto the set. The velvet curtains were raised and he stood in Lady Sneerwell's bedroom, looking out across the footlights, over the orchestra pit, to the rows and tiers of red plush seats, the gilt cherubs and carved draperies. His eyes carried up and up to the faint chandeliers and the invisible ceiling. He stood very still and the theater was very quiet. A strange, suffocating excitement caught at his throat, shortening his breath.

Then, as he watched, lights began to flicker, along the walls and behind the boxes, unsteady, shimmering, like candlelight. The crystal chandeliers glowed and fractured into a thousand glittering fragments and a distant buzz of voices grew louder, swelling, until the sound filled the theater and swept across the stage, breaking into distinct levels: laughter, male and female; snatches of conversation, the chink of bottle and glass; the clatter of feet. A glow filled the auditorium, a glow of silks and satins, of bare, soft shoulders and powdered wigs, of silver buckles and sword hilts, a hundred fluttering fans.

Richard stood dazzled, bemused.

The voices became more distinct. One was calling to him. His eyes swept the crowd, fastening on a small, dark figure in the stalls, an urchinlike boy, hair uncovered, the face pale, the eyes wide, the mouth a round circle. "Ere," it was saying, "who are you? What you doing up there?"

"I am Joseph Surface."

The noise of the audience died and drifted away. The lights dimmed, the men and the women faded, through the walls, beyond the pit, out of the boxes.

"I am Joseph Surface," he repeated, his voice loud now in the stillness of the empty theater. He found himself gazing down at the white face of the callboy, the two of them alone in the dimness, a few wall sconces illuminating the vastness. His throat was dry, his voice cracked. "I am Richard Masters. I'm playing Surface tonight."

"Cor, mister, you half scared me for a moment," the boy said. "I thought you was a ghost, honest I did. You shouldn't be standing there like that, not in the dark, with your costume on and all that."

Richard had difficulty focusing his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I was just getting . . ." he paused. "I was just getting the feel of things."

The boy continued to stare. "Are you the American as wanted coffee?"

Richard gripped the top of the gold-knobbed cane, the round end warm under his hot hand. "I guess I'm the American," he said, "and I certainly could do with that cup of coffee."

"I'll bring it to your dressing room in a minute or two. Won't take me a jiffy to make."

Richard returned unsteadily to the small, cramped dressing room. The atmosphere of this place was really getting to him. He felt uneasy, strangely languorous and weary, as though he had taken a long journey. When the coffee came, he drank it down in a couple of gulps. It was the best British instant, milky and tepid. It did nothing to shake his torpor. He had an overwhelming desire to sleep. He stretched himself on the hard, too-short couch and was deeply, heavily asleep as soon as he closed his eyes.

The Playhouse did not run to separate dressing rooms for each member of the company, and Richard was roused by the noisy arrival of Simon Montague, who tonight was playing Charles Surface in *The School for Scandal*.

"What, asleep already!" Simon yelled at Richard as he threw open the door. "You Yanks take the dictum of early to bed and early to rise to ridiculous lengths." The door slammed behind him. "When I was in that play on Broadway, the whole audience fell asleep at nine o'clock." He pulled off his jacket and slung it across his chair. "Do you suppose that had anything to do with our closing after ten days?"

Simon rumpled his black hair and thrust his face two inches away from the mirror. "I've got to get at least twenty years off this crumbling ruin before I can present myself to my adoring fans." The bright blue eyes slid away from his reflection and he looked back through the mirror at Richard, now struggling to sit upright. "You don't look too hot yourself. Better get some goop on your face to bring back the old healthy tinge."

Simon began to pull off his clothes. Tie, shirt and trousers followed each other in furious succession to a heap around the chair.

"You're very quiet, Yank. Getting the old sinking feeling, eh? Not surprising, I must say, throwing you in at the deep end like this. But you'll be all right, never fear. You seem to be born to this period junk. Two months out of RADA, all the way from the prairies, and you're wearing those frills as though you've been used to them all your natural. Give me Pinter any day, I say."

The chatter washed over Richard. He liked Simon, who had been a good friend to him since he had come to the Playhouse, helping him find the digs in a tall Georgian terrace high over the city, guiding him around the pubs, putting him wise to the political nuances of the company, cheering him on when Richard got the part of Joseph Surface. Richard knew that Simon was amused at the way he, the Yank, had gone overboard for history, but Simon had only helped to foster his interest. He had shown him out-of-the-way antique shops and bookshops, and had introduced him to the Georgian Museum, tucked away in a quiet back street of the town. Richard suspected that Simon might even have pushed his name forward for this part, being not without influence as a long-standing member of the company.

Now, however, he could not listen to what his friend was saying; his mind felt detached, distant, and quite automatically he sat down in front of the mirror, tucking the cloth around his neck to apply his makeup. He heard, and yet did not hear, the voice of the callboy coming down the corridor, banging on the doors: "First call, ladies and gents. First call."

The detachment lasted while Simon rambled on, through the second call; while Simon took his arm in an over-firm grip and led him to the wings; through the sound of the national anthem and the swish of the rising curtain; even through the first few minutes of the play. Then came his cue and he was walking forward onto the stage, and suddenly the world was right again, the colors clear and distinct, the people three-dimensional.

"My dear Lady Sneerwell, how do you do today? Mr. Snake, your most obedient."

He was a great success. Everyone said so. Simon thumped his back as he made his last exit. "Marvelous stuff, Yank. To the manner born, no less. It'll be the National Theater for you yet."

As he took his bow with Molly White, who played Lady Sneerwell, the applause rose, washing over them in comforting waves. "All for you, Richard dear," she whispered, as they bowed to each other. "You were terrific, absolutely terrific." She smiled dazzlingly at him as she swept low to the ground. Richard felt dizzy.

The producer, Joe Taylor, slapped him on the back with the script as they went backstage. "Great, Dicky old son, great! I had my doubts about an American in the part, but you didn't put a foot wrong. Not a trace of accent. How did you do it?"

He didn't know how he had done it. It had been so easy; no effort at all. The lines had come as though he had been speaking them all his life; every step, every movement had been so natural. To the manner born, that's what Simon had called it.

There was a lot of shouting and laughter backstage. People were wandering around in various forms of undress. Beer was produced and they sat in each other's dressing rooms talking theater, and Molly White nibbled his ear.

Gradually, the excitement wore off. Molly White didn't look so hot in her mini, her hair falling over her face. When the shouting was at its loudest and Simon was nuzzling Mrs. Candour in a corner, Richard slipped away, down the narrow corridor once more, a faint muzziness in his head that he supposed came from the beer and the cigarette smoke. Briggs was still in his sentry box by the stage door, the hands of the clock now pointing to midnight.

"They still at it, are they?" Briggs asked, inclining his head in the direction of the dressing rooms. "It's usually like this on the first night, I always have trouble clearing them out." He leaned on the door, chewing on a matchstick. "You going home now, Mr. Masters? First to come, first to go, eh? How did it go tonight, then?"

Richard made the effort to stop and talk to him. "Did you see the play?" he asked, aware that he was half hoping to hear more words of praise.

"Me? No, bless your life. I've been working at the Playhouse for twenty years and I ain't seen a performance here yet. I have to wait until the morning's paper to see how you've all done. First thing, when I retire, I'm going to go out and buy meself a season ticket. Well, good night, then," he said, raising his hand in the mock salute as he saw that Richard was stepping out to the street. "Bet you won't be so early tomorrow night, sir. The excitement will have worn off a bit."

Richard spent a restless night. The lines of the play kept coming back to him, his first entrance, the waves of laughter, the applause, the glare of the footlights. As he tossed and turned, the theater seemed so much more real than his narrow bed. Even when he reached over and switched on the light, springing the small impersonal room into focus, his wandering mind could not pull away from Sheridan's world. He fell, at last, into a deep sleep as dawn began to illuminate the corners of the window.

It was the middle of the morning before he went into the town, where he bought a local paper so that he could read the reviews over a cup of coffee. The café was cool and quiet. Apart from himself there were three flower-hatted ladies attacking cream cakes with every symptom of guilt, conversing among themselves and not sparing him a second glance. He turned to the center page of the paper.

Mr. Richard Masters, he read, brings to the part of Joseph Surface a panache and a naturalness seldom seen in plays of this period. Mr. Masters, I understand, is an American. How is it that this young man can conjure up the eighteenth century in a way that I have never seen an English actor of his age and experience achieve?

Very gratifying. Richard folded the paper, reached for his cup, and looked over to the three ladies. He felt they should be aware that there was a rising young actor in their midst.

They were not there.

The room had become thick with smoke, and at their table sat three men, talking and laughing loudly, cards in their hands, a jug of wine on the table, a pile of coins glinting on the dark wood. One of the men tipped back on his heavy, sturdy chair, throwing his head back with laughter, his hair tied behind with a ribbon. His feet, clad in black, silver-buckled shoes, crashed to the ground; his ankles neat in white silk stockings. The noise did not come just from that one corner. Richard turned his head stiffly. The room was crowded with other men, wearing cocked hats and silk coats, buckskin breeches and lace ruffles, some with swords

clanking at their side, some smoking long, curved clay pipes. The place throbbed with masculine vitality.

A girl moved among them, buxom, her dress low on her bosom, one arm lifted high carrying a tray, curls drifting around her forehead and her ears, her hips swiveling to avoid searching hands. Her color was bright, her eyes sparkled. They met Richard's and her cheeks dimpled. "More coffee?" She smiled at him, a beauty spot high on one cheekbone.

Richard only stared at her.

"More coffee?" she asked again, leaning over him at his table until he felt suffocated with her heavy female perfume. The empty, cool café was back and there was this girl in a short skirt and a mole on her face offering him coffee from a glass pot, and there were three genteel English ladies murmuring in low voices at an adjacent table.

He had another cup of coffee, then two more. The girl said, "You've been looking at me ever so queer, like. Was there anything wrong?"

He paid for the coffee and assured her, "No, there was nothing wrong, absolutely nothing, but, well, do you happen to know how old this café is?"

Her thick lips pouted at him. "Oh, it's been here since the year dot—they say it's been a café as long as anyone can remember. Used to be a coffee shop, they called it, when men wore wigs and that sort of thing, you know."

After that, the day was a jumble. Richard eventually ate a very late lunch in a Wimpy bar, the nearest thing to an American hamburger stand that he knew of in town. Amid the chrome and stainless steel he felt safe from the past. He had, for a fleeting moment, a sudden and unexpected wave of homesickness, and he wondered if his pals still used Al's Drive-In out on the strip, where they would congregate on those bright warm, summer evenings that were so rare in this country, and where they would talk and laugh about the girls and drink endless bottles of cola. So long ago. Another world; another century.

He ended up lying on his bed in his digs, staring at the ceiling, until the first half-light of evening crept over the city and the isolation and the confusion of his thoughts drove him inexorably down to the theater.

Briggs greeted him at the stage door. "What, you here again so early, Mr. Masters? Well, it'll soon wear off, mark my words. Didn't seem to do you any harm last night, though." He waved his edition of the *Evening News* at Richard. "They do say you were grand in the part. Keep it up.

I like to be proud of my young actors." He grinned and winked at Richard. "Keep it up, then," he called to the departing back.

There was this compulsion to get into his costume again, and once armored by the silks and the velvets, the doubts and the disorder melted away. Yet he could not rest quietly in the dressing room. He had to get out onto the stage again. Was it to find out if the spell of last evening could be repeated?

Once more he stood still and silent in the eighteenth-century room, gazing out over the empty theater. He didn't have to wait long.

Soon those ghostly lights flickered, and the ghostly figures thronged the ornate auditorium, and the distant voices swelled and roared until he, Joseph Surface, was the focus of a thousand eyes and the object of applause for a thousand hands. He smiled and bowed, his hat in his hand, his gold-knobbed cane in the other; one buckled foot stretched in front of the other, his powdered head almost touching a silken knee.

The applause rose and fell and faded to a single handclap and a jeering voice. "Bravo, Mr. Masters, bravo," and there was the callboy again, waving from the pit. "You didn't scare me tonight, Mr. Masters. I knew it was you up there, as soon as I came in. What you doing there, Mr. Masters? Practicing for your knighthood?"

Richard retreated from the stage with as much dignity as he could muster. Back in the dressing room, he carefully removed his velvet coat and his wig and, stretching out on the couch, slept once more that deep, dreamless sleep.

Simon crashed open the door. "Well, you made it, my friend. The Yanks have done it again. Your fans are queuing at the stage door for your autograph. They positively booed because I wasn't you." He waved some newspaper clippings in Richard's face. "Here; I've started your fame file for you."

With a flourish, Simon pinned the clippings on the diamond-patterned board between the mirrors. "You'll have to send these to the old folks back home. They'll be real proud of you in Mastersville, U.S.A."

There was the same struggle to get back to reality, the same impression that everyone was painted onto stage scenery until the moment came for him to walk onto the set, then as he spoke the familiar words: "My dear Lady Sneerwell, how do you do today?" the world fell back in place again. He was Joseph Surface, and again he was a triumph.

As he took his bow, he felt for an expectant moment that the twentieth-

century audience might fade away; there was a brief moment when the lights started to flicker and the faint iridescent glow began to fill the theater, but it faded again before it could grow to substance. The curtain fell for the final time after their fifth bow and he was left feeling flat. As he cleaned off his makeup with cold cream, Richard dreaded the thought of an early return to the tossing and turning in his solitary room.

Simon saved him. "I can see you have a touch of the second-night blues," he said, as he unbuttoned his lace shirt. "I would suggest a little visit to the Unicorn. The landlord can be most solicitous on these occasions. Apart from which, he will usually offer the ladies and gentlemen of the Playhouse a free drink." He pulled on his trousers. "We are considered good for business, and he is always given a few tickets to the show. An admirable, advantageous arrangement, I would say, wouldn't you?"

Richard could only answer monosyllabically. He was very subdued as they crossed the cobbled street to the old pub. The Unicorn had been an ancient dockside inn, and still retained the flavor, though the water had long since been diverted a hundred yards away. Where ships had once moored, there was now a street of warehouses and brokers' offices.

The landlord greeted Simon enthusiastically and did, indeed, offer them a drink. He was coming to see the play the very next day, he told them. He had read the splendid notices that Mr. Masters had received. "It's a pleasure to welcome you to the Unicorn, sir," he said, raising his glass in a toast.

Richard had a whiskey. It tasted good, though the two small pieces of ice that the landlord had provided melted rapidly. There was this strange inability of the English to produce enough ice to make a decent drink. However, he had a second one and began to cheer up. He felt it was time that he confided in Simon about his haunting visions.

"Simon," he began, "I've had the weirdest—"

"Just a moment, old man," interrupted Simon, "I must visit the gent's. Be back in a minute."

As Richard swirled the amber liquid in his glass, waiting for Simon, he half knew what was going to happen. The long, smooth legs of the girls in their mini-skirts, the tweed jackets and the ties, the gleaming rows of bottles and glasses, the red handles of the beer pumps, all shimmered and faded. Vague, somehow menacing figures began to creep into the corners of Richard's mind. He stood, clutching his glass, waiting for

them to fill out and become human, but they were farther off than usual. Then one figure emerged, clear in bright colors, and it was Charles Surface, elegant in a red silk coat, laughing, walking toward him.

"Charles!"

"What do you mean, *Charles*?" and it was Simon in a red sweater and gray trousers, laughing at him. "Come on, Richard, old dear, you've got that damned play too much on your mind." He picked up his beer. "What was that you were going to say to me?"

Richard stared into the blue eyes, the uncomplicated face. "Oh, nothing. Forget it." He couldn't explain it to Simon. He couldn't explain it to anyone, let alone to himself.

For the rest of the week he avoided going to the theater too early. He stayed in bed late in the mornings, ate his lunch in the Wimpy bar, spent his afternoons at the cinema. He made sure that he arrived at the theater with only enough time to change and make up, when the place was already alive with the rest of the cast, stagehands, and dressers.

The ghosts still hovered, but he managed to keep them in the past where they belonged.

Then, on Sunday, he ruined everything by accepting an invitation from Simon to visit his parents in Bath. They walked in the perfectly symmetrical, eighteenth-century crescents and squares and took tea in the pump rooms. Richard was lost. He gave up the fight and abandoned himself to his phantoms. Richard Masters became a twentieth-century ghost in the eighteenth century.

He found that he could conjure up the past at will, in the old bookshops, in the parks, best of all in the Georgian Museum. The attendant greeted him as an old friend when he wandered there in the afternoons, and would leave him to stand entranced in the bedrooms and the sitting rooms, peopling them with rustling silken ladies and bowing gentlemen. The streets came alive with horses and coaches and Richard would catch tantalizing glimpses of bright groups and crowds that vanished as he came too near them. There was a barrier through which he could not pass; none of these figures would speak with him, and he soon found that a twentieth-century voice caused them to melt away. Neither would they appear when he was with anyone else, so he took to avoiding company, trying to become more and more immersed in this beautiful world.

The play ran for another two weeks. Each evening, Richard arrived at the theater by five-thirty. He tried coming earlier, but Briggs was not

there and the stage door was firmly shut against him. Briggs took him for granted now, grinning indulgently, waving him into the darkness and the enchantment of his very own audience. He even took to using snuff.

His Joseph Surface improved with every performance. It was more polished, more elegant, more authentic every evening. The audience and the company applauded him rapturously. He was acclaimed as the most promising young actor that the Playhouse had produced for a generation.

The only one who stood apart from the praise was Simon. He would catch Richard's eye in the mirror some evenings, and there was a worried expression in the light blue eyes.

"You're keeping very much to yourself these days," Simon eventually remarked. "You've changed, Richard. Got yourself a good bird?"

For a moment Richard hesitated, half wanting to tell Simon, then dismissed the thought of his understanding. He couldn't bear the idea of ridicule. He smiled and shook his head.

"Well, maybe you should," said Simon. "A nice healthy girl would take you out of yourself a bit. How about Molly? She's healthy, all right, and she fancies you. I recognize the old light in her eyes."

"Oh, Molly." Richard rejected the suggestion. "She's . . . she's too modern."

Simon raised his eyebrows. "You prefer her as Lady Sneerwell, eh? Well, I tell you, this is a better world than it was in Sheridan's day. It wasn't all that it's portrayed on the stage, you know."

The last two evenings of the play, Richard Masters played entirely to his own audience. They came to watch him, filling the stalls and the boxes, the circle and the gallery as they had done each evening before the performances, cheering and clapping, more exuberant, more extroverted than any twentieth-century audience. Richard was inspired. He was a shining star, filling the stage, lighting it up, leaving an emptiness behind whenever he made an exit.

When the curtain fell for the final time on the final evening, he stood on the dusty boards, dazed and disbelieving. It was over. Suddenly he felt very tired.

Everyone was laughing and congratulating him. Simon slapped him hard on the back, yelling: "Well, how does it feel to have finished with all that period stuff? What about getting your teeth into a bit of Pinter next?"

The blood roared in Richard's head. For a moment he felt his knees

buckling under him. He leaned heavily on the gold-knobbed cane, staring with wide eyes at Simon. Was it all going to disappear with that final swish of the curtain? Could he ever perform in a modern play?

"A party! A party!" Several of the cast swept him along off the stage. "Must have a party! Over to the Unicorn. Everyone get changed. Come on, quick. A toast for Richard!"

He sat in the dressing room, shaken, an empty shell. He wanted to put his head down among the containers of makeup and weep. Had his lovely charming world gone forever? Was it all to be no more?

Simon ignored Richard's white face and trembling hands. He kept up the usual string of chatter and banter, and as Richard reluctantly divested himself of the velvet coat and silk waistcoat, he threw his other clothes across to him. "Hurry up, old dear. They are all waiting for you. It's a big night for you tonight."

Once out of his Joseph Surface costume, Richard began to feel more normal. He'd make out—he'd look back on this one day and ridicule himself. Enough of this nonsense. Life was here, it was the twentieth century and he, Richard Masters, must live life where he found it. He tried to convince himself.

The cast thronged and jostled him across to the Unicorn.

"Tonight it's the local brew for you," bellowed Simon. "Drink up and be merry."

The specialty of the house was draught cider, sweet and rough, very palatable, very intoxicating. Two pints of that, downed rather quickly, and the English veneer began to leave Richard. He could detect the hard, nasal twang creeping back into his words, but there was nothing that he wanted to do about it. He laughed at himself, a loud, brazen laugh, and when Molly White leaned her warm flank against him, he squeezed her hard, letting out a not too subdued cowboy whoop. Her hair tickled his nose and he rubbed his face against her head, closing his eyes.

There was a moment when Richard Masters teetered on the brink between the past and the present, then without warning the past rushed at him.

"Take care, my good sir. This low class of tavern is not for the likes of you."

The voice came, hoarse and tremulous, from behind his left shoulder. Richard lazily opened his eyes and he beheld, in the corner, a bundle

of rags, animated by two reedlike arms protruding from in front, and a wasted, cadaverous face above. The mouth, completely devoid of teeth, split into the travesty of a smile. A foul odor assailed Richard from the open mouth and he tried to draw back, the weight of the girl against his side preventing him.

"Nay, sir, I am only a poor beggar. I'll do you no harm." The claw of a hand reached out for him, but did not quite reach. "But look around, kind sir. There are many here who would see you beaten and robbed and lying in the gutter." The fleshless hand gestured.

Richard slowly dragged his eyes from the wreck of a human being, with reluctant dread. The inn was a scene from Hogarth come to life. Bawds and beldams; drunken, lurching sailors with tarred hair; scarecrow figures in filthy rags; emaciated, crying children; a small soot-covered boy coughing into a dirty rag. A rancid smell of unwashed bodies and cheap gin pervaded the smoky, ill-lit tavern; screams and oaths filled the thick air. Richard was nauseated, disgusted. This was not the world he had come to know so well.

"Look over there, kind sir. Those are the sort of ruffians you must beware of."

The dirty fingernail pointed along the counter to two dark men dressed in black broadcloth, a heavy growth of beard on their thin faces, woolen caps pulled down to the level of their eyes, which turned hungrily and menacingly toward Richard.

"And those women," the hoarse voice whispered in Richard's ear. "All doxies, I warrant you. That one by your side, sir. What would a fine gentleman like you be doing with a woman like that?"

Richard stiffened and froze for a moment, then suddenly he seized the girl by the shoulders and whirled her around to face him. His mouth dropped with horror. More hag than girl. A dreadful painted face, pitted with smallpox scars, drunken, bleary, red-rimmed eyes, loose lips hanging open.

He flung her from him with a curse. He saw the two men in black start forward from the bar and he wheeled, pushing his way through the stinking crowd. Hands reached out to stop him, but he tore himself loose frantically. He must get out of this awful place. He scrabbled desperately at the door, then was running down the dark corridor to the main entrance.

He could hear cries and pounding footsteps behind him. Panic blinded

him and he threw himself out through the front door, looking neither to the left nor right. He neither saw nor heard the rumble of the coach and the horses, and was only aware at the very last moment of the hot breath of the animals and the rearing hooves that came crashing down on his skull. A wheel caught him and flung him to the gutter, where he lay quiet and still.

Simon and Molly were a second or two after him, running down the corridor in pursuit, slow to react as he had cast Molly from him with that look of horror on his face. They reached the door just in time to see Richard run straight into the front wheels of the bus, then the sickening sight of his body thrown in the air to crash by the curb right in front of the theater. The bus screamed to a slewing halt yards down the road.

Briggs came rushing from his box at the stage door. "I saw it," he cried. "I saw it. Never gave the driver a chance." Then, "Oh, it's Mr. Masters!"

They knelt by the body in the road. Molly sobbed and Simon clutched the still warm hand, his face contorted. He reached out gently to straighten Richard's torn white shirt. As he pulled the cloth around the body, his hand paused. "Look at this." He stared disbelievingly. "Look at this!"

There, on the white shirt, black and startling, and quite plain in the lights from the Playhouse, were the unmistakable imprints of horses' hooves.

Briggs, gabbling from the pavement, said loudly, quite inconsequently, "The bus came from over there, where the old stagecoach station used to be."



Deadly Shade of Blue

by Jack Sharkey

The man he chose was named Shemley. Philip Shemley. He chose him after due deliberation, for Eddie Sherwood had a primary aim, complicated by side issues. His primary aim was to murder his wife, Anita; his secondary and twofold aim was to be present when she met her demise, and yet, to have no suspicion of the crime fall upon him. In order to achieve these aims, her murder must be accomplished by a third party. Furthermore, the third party must do this of his own volition, which ruled out a hired killer who might either talk or try blackmail later. Eddie had settled on the choice of a man who killed on impulse, who could be brought into Anita's presence and then just left to follow his natural—or unnatural, if you will—instinct. In short, a homicidal maniac.

Now, obviously, one cannot simply apply for such a person at a Domestic Service Agency. Nor can one raid the lunatic asylums at will. And even if that were possible, how to transport a homicidal maniac into the presence of one's wife, without first, or after, for that matter, falling victim to the homicidal maniac oneself? After deep cogitation, Eddie settled on starting with a *sane* man, who was to be *driven* nuts. "And," thought Eddie, "to overcome the danger involved in dealing with my finished product, the madman, I need really a *fringe* maniac, that is, a man who would seem normal on the surface; calm, gregarious, and so on. Until something triggered him." What Eddie needed, therefore, was: (1) a man who could be driven to the fringe of mania, and (2) a trigger, or mind-robbing impetus, that could be set in motion by Anita herself.

First, to find a subject, suitable for maddening. That part was easy. Eddie had a large house, and many servants. One of them would have to do the job. Eddie simply chose the quietest one, on the theory that only people of average intelligence are talkative. A person who is reclusive with his voice is so for one of two reasons: he has high intelligence, and is doing a lot of thinking; or he has low intelligence, and is doing a lot

of existing. If high—very near the snapping level into mania. If low—very near the moronic level of indifference to law. Either would be fine.

That is how he came to choose Philip Shemley. Shemley was a mere assistant valet, and quite shy and retiring. Eddie hardly ever saw him, since Shemley's orders came from Robinson, the first valet. Robinson laid out Eddie's things, and helped him dress. To Shemley went the necessary, but much less prestigious, jobs of cleaning and pressing and polishing the items of Eddie's wardrobe.

Shemley was quite noticeably nervous when Eddie sent for him. "Sit down," he said to the man, gesturing to the chair across from his own. When Shemley, embarrassed at his breach of protocol, had gingerly perched himself on the edge of the chair, Eddie said, "I've had my eye on you for some time, Shemley."

Shemley, aware that a preliminary statement such as this might lead into accusations regarding missing jewelry, money, or silverware, turned grey and began to perspire. "I hope—" he said, his voice barely audible, "my work has been satisfactory, sir."

"More than satisfactory," said Eddie. Eddie sensed the man's relief. After a pause, Eddie said, "However—" than which there is no more terrifying word to a person teetering on the brink of uncertainty.

Watching the tension build up in Shemley once more, Eddie continued, "I find myself in a peculiar position, Shemley. Diligence such as yours should not go unrewarded; yet, to what position could I conceivably advance you? Only to that of first valet, but Robinson has a few years of good service left in him yet, and he is also diligent."

"Yes, sir?" Shemley urged subserviently, when the pause became unbearably long.

"So," said Eddie, heartlessly, "I find that I shall have to let you go."

"I—I beg pardon, sir?" murmured Shemley, his voice weak and frightened. "Let me go, sir? I don't see—I don't quite understand, sir . . ."

"Isn't it obvious?" said Eddie, letting his voice drip with gentle concern for the man. "Here I have a superior worker laboring at a job which is no longer fitting for a man of his diligence to hold, and yet I have no job readily available to advance him to, you see? The only decent thing I can do is to let him go, so that he may find better employment elsewhere."

"Begging your pardon, sir," croaked the man, "but it isn't very easy to find positions these days . . ."

"You would have the best of references," said Eddie, knowing full

well—as did Shemley—that the most superlative of recommendations is always somewhat clouded by the salient fact that the servant, excellent or not, has nonetheless been dismissed by his prior employer.

"I appreciate that, sir," said Shemley, with a quaver in his voice. "And I thank you. But I am no young man, sir. In a toss-up, jobs go to younger men, sir. Youth is somehow always a better reference than the most admirable indications of fealty in an older manservant."

Eddie frowned a bit at Shemley's command of language, then decided that perhaps his wonted taciturnity was based upon intelligence, rather than the lack of it, and that was, as already noted, so much to the good.

"Then," he said kindly, "what would you suggest?"

"If—if you no longer think it fitting that I continue as assistant valet, sir—is there no other job in your employ that I might do? I know a bit about gardening, and with practice I could perfect what I know about driving . . ."

"Assistant gardener would be a comedown," said Eddie, "and, as for alternate chauffeur, well—your age would be against you. An older man has slower reflexes, Shemley; and I'm certain you would dread being the indirect cause of my having an accident." Eddie was certain of no such thing as he watched Shemley's face. At that moment, the servant could gladly have destroyed the employer whose kind heart was slowly encompassing the servant's ruin.

"I—I don't know what to say, sir," said Shemley, in a voice very like a smothered moan. "I've liked working here. I've always been a good worker—" He took a deep breath then continued "—and I had rather hoped to remain here in your employ until my retirement."

"I understand, Shemley," said Eddie, employing a tone of warm concern that would be, under the circumstances, all the more agonizing to the man. "And I assure you that if there *were* something available—Wait a minute!" A calculated pause, until the other man fairly screamed inwardly in desperation, then, "There *is* one job, I'm sure you wouldn't be—"

"*What, sir?*" blurted Shemley. "I would be proud to do *anything* to remain in your service!"

"Then I will make an admission to you, Shemley," said Eddie, in a suddenly confidential tone. "I cannot abide the color blue."

"Is—is that a fact, sir!" said Shemley, mechanically.

"A terrible fact," nodded Eddie. "You have perhaps noticed that you,

the other servants, my wife, and myself all have brown eyes?"

"I—I can't say that I have, sir . . ." said the man, thoughtfully. "But now you mention it, I don't seem to recall a blue-eyed person in the lot . . ."

"There is a reason for it, Shemley."

"Ah?"

"The color depresses me, throws upon me a veritable blanket of melancholy, floods my soul with gloom."

"I see," said Shemley, his tone implying that he at least followed the thread, if not perceiving the end of it.

"Have you noted that when I go out of doors, I invariably wear tinted lenses in my glasses?" pursued Eddie.

"I have, indeed, sir. I'd supposed your eyes were simply sensitive to bright daylight."

This being the actual truth, Eddie was hard put not to smile. "No, Shemley," he lied smoothly. "The sky is what does it. In winter, I can do without the glasses, since the general overhead tones are greyish; but in summer, when the firmament is its most cerulean—I cannot bear it."

"But," said Shemley, after Eddie sat unspeaking for a full minute, "I fail to see the connection between this unfortunate affliction and a change of employment for myself." It was a bold statement coming from so shy a man, but Eddie's velvet needling had driven Shemley beyond the bounds of propriety.

Eddie pretended not to notice the shift in the man's deportment. He smiled, spread his hands matter-of-factly, and said, "Why, Shemley, I thought you would already have discerned it: Your job would be to make certain that nothing blue—nothing whatsoever—got into this house." He sighed tenderly. "If, of course, the job were to your liking . . ."

Surprisingly, Shemley hesitated.

Then he said, "It is a strange sort of employment, sir. Rather like that of a watchdog, in a way."

"I knew it would not appeal to you," said Eddie, giving Shemley a semantic shove.

"Oh, I didn't say *that*, sir!" said the man, swiftly. "I'll be proud to take it on, sir. Only—"

"Only—?"

"I wish I had a clearer idea of my duties."

"What could be simpler? *Nothing blue must ever come inside this*

house. You have absolute domain over that hue, Shemley. Let nothing, or nobody, stand in your way. I do not wish to set eyes upon that shade."

"If—if I should fail, sir . . . ?" stammered the man, feeling his way. "I mean, if a bluebird flew in the window—"

"Then your own personal bluebird flies out," said Eddie, succinctly. "One sight of that color, and I shall have to feel you have been derelict in your duties. Surely you feel up to the task, Shemley? If you do not, say so now, and you will receive excellent references, a small bonus for your years of work here, and my blessing. No hard feelings, as they say. But if you *do* take this job, and fail at it, then you will be dismissed with no references at all, and should feel happy to depart the premises without my giving you a dressing-down before the other servants."

Shemley's smile was forced, his face greyer than when he'd entered the room. But he had no choice, and he and Eddie knew it. "I will take the job, sir," he said.

"Good man, Shemley," said Eddie, picking up a book he had no intention of reading. "That will be all."

With a flurry of assurances that the job would be done, Shemley hurried from the room. Eddie set the book down again, tapped the tips of his fingers together, and let a devilish smile he'd been suppressing for the half-hour of the interview contort his features.

"A man about to face ruin, drudgery, or the poorhouse," said Eddie to himself, "is fully as ripe for murder as the man upon the brink of madness. Now, this afternoon, when Anita begins to supervise the workers in the east parlor, we shall see what we shall see. I don't know which I detest more; her putting up wallpaper over that ancient oak paneling, or the pattern she has selected for the paper itself. Cornflowers! Ugh!"

Reluctantly, he lifted himself from the chair and hurried upstairs to his room. There was no guaranteeing Shemley was as yet ready to snap. The servant would need some priming, first.

In his bedroom, Eddie took from his pocket a key for a certain locked drawer of the bureau. In the drawer were a number of items he'd gathered since perfecting his plan. "Blue," he said to himself, sorting through the contents of the drawer, "was an ideal color to choose. There are so few objects in nature that have the color, that the incidence of blue objects should be quite small, just enough to keep old Shemley on the go . . . Ah, but *these* should set his ancient heart fluttering in panic!"

"These" were a pale blue silk shirtwaist, which Eddie hung in his

closet, a dark little bottle of bluing to be displayed in the basement near the home laundry machines (Nelly, the family laundress, Eddie happened to know, used ordinary bottled bleach on the clothes, but Shemley wouldn't realize that), an appropriately tinted sheet of music for the downstairs piano: "Little Girl Blue," a trio of blue pastel bars of soap, one for the bathroom on each floor, and a bottle of peacock-blue ink, to be left on the desk in the den.

"This," Eddie murmured happily to himself, running upstairs and down to distribute his psychic nudgers, "should give me a comprehensive insight into how well I have chosen my man. I shall allow him one hour in which to discover and remove these articles, and then I shall wander back through the places where I have implanted them, to test his efficiency."

As Eddie was deploying the last of his inanimate strategems—the bottle of ink—he happened to notice a few triangles of paper lying against the foot of the wall near the bookshelves in the den. They were, he saw as he bent over them, the sort of fragments one achieves when one has been snipping at something with a scissors in a hurry, where a too-swift angling with the blades lops off an unnoticed corner of the sheet. Eddie felt one of the fragments. It was stiff, slick paper, the sort one finds as the pages of expensive books.

With a sudden giddy realization of what must be happening, Eddie rose from his squat over the scraps, and hastily withdrew volume "B" of the encyclopedia from its place on the shelf. A quick riffling through the pages showed him the accuracy of his deductions. Gaping holes stared at him from certain pages; the pages, if Eddie deduced correctly, where one could garner information about "Blue, the color", "Blueberries", "Bluebottle fly", "Bluing" and the like.

"Damn," thought Eddie, with a thrill of admiration. "He's *fast!*"

On impulse, Eddie hurried back upstairs to his room. The shirtwaist was gone from his closet. He dashed to the bathroom. No soap.

Knowing full well what he would find, he nevertheless made his way once more to the basement, where the bottle of bluing was no longer to be encountered, anywhere. By the time his hurried circuit had taken him back to the den, the ink was gone. A swift gallop into the music room evinced the sight of music on the rack above the piano keyboard, but Eddie's momentary elation vanished as he drew closer to it. It was "Red Sails in the Sunset."

"This," said Eddie to himself, "is positively *eerie!*"

He left the music room, and as he passed thoughtfully through the front hall; he encountered a young man, a stranger, in the act of departing.

"I beg your pardon—?" he said, curiously. "Did you want to see me about something?"

The young man shook his head. "No, sir. I've quite finished."

"Finished?" said Eddie. "Finished what?"

"Fixing the TVs and radios," said the man.

"Oh," said Eddie, about to turn away. Then he faced the young man once more, as the youth was opening the front door. "Excuse me," he said, "but—you don't look like a repairman." The stranger, dressed in a charcoal grey Brooks Brothers suit, with his neat black horn-rimmed glasses and jaunty crewcut, did not, as a matter of note, look even anything *remotely* like a repairman.

"I'm not," said the man, pausing upon the front porch, in the shadow of one of the tall white colonial pillars. "I'm from the University. I teach Advanced Physics. Your man Shemley had me do/him a favor. I don't ordinarily indulge in repair work, but he made it most handsomely worth my while."

"But—" said Eddie.

The young man, however, indicated a taxi just pulling up to the porch along the horseshoe drive.

"That's for me," he explained, hurrying toward the steps. "I'm sure Shemley will give you the details. Good day, sir."

"Good—good day," echoed Eddie, shutting the door. "Now," he addressed the wall in the foyer, "I wonder what—"

Not being inclined to waste his time in futile speculation, Eddie instead took the most direct means available to him, and went into the den once more. A touch of his finger upon a button caused a sliding panel to move back and expose a thirty-inch screen of a color TV. Eddie worked the dials, and then a picture appeared. All across the screen was a glorious scene of Washington, D.C. An unctuous announcer's voice was describing the beauties of the capital city, while the camera swept slowly across the majestic sights there. The day was bright and sunny. And the sky was a brilliant emerald green.

Startled, Eddie sank back into a leather armchair to watch. A passing shot of the country's flag showed that it, too, had undergone the same chromatic metamorphosis. Eddie tried twirling the "hue" adjustor, but

his efforts did nothing to change the general tone. He could get a dusty pastel green, the aforementioned emerald shade, or a dark, dull jade tone. Not a trace of blue.

"Ah," thought Eddie suddenly, "the *narrative!*" He listened carefully. The panorama of the capital soon reached a cultural phase of the country's business. On the screen, a military glee club was singing. As it so happened, the men, in four-part lusty harmony, were chanting an Irving Berlin favorite of yesteryear. Eddie had to listen to it for a full minute before he realized what he was hearing. The song seemed to be "Green Skies."

He jumped from the chair and almost mashed his nose against the glass front of the set, checking the lip-movements of the men in the chorus. Admittedly, whenever they came to the unspeakable word, the region of their mouths grew a little jerky, but their teeth showed true. Teeth never showed on "blue." But on "green" . . .

"I must admit," said Eddie, turning off the set, "the man is damnable thorough." He turned suddenly, and went to the window. Outside, the skyways still shone with their old familiar hue. However, Eddie's orders had only banned the color *inside* the house; Shemley would naturally suppose that Eddie—unless a complete fool—would wear his tinted glasses when out-of-doors, if the color were so painful to him.

"Still," thought Eddie, "there is a way in which he may have slipped up!" He went to the wall, upon which was hung a baroque-framed mirror, got it down with some difficulty, and carried it to the window. "I should think that the reflection, being *indoors* in the mirror, would constitute a breach of his agreement," puffed Eddie, setting his burden onto a chair opposite the window. He tilted it until it reflected the sky beyond the windowpanes, and looked at it, long and hard. Within the mirror, the sky was a not-displeasing shade of violet.

"Impossible," said Eddie, looking closely at the mirror. Then he saw where the glass had been sprayed with a thin coating of some pale pink stuff, an unobtrusive transparent coating which was just sufficient to transmute the spectrum from outside.

His respect for the old servant grew into positive admiration by the time Eddie had lugged the heavy mirror back to its hook on the wall. With all the running upstairs and down, and the unaccustomed lifting of heavy objects, Eddie was beginning to get a bit woozy. He stepped to the sideboard to mix himself a drink, and noted, almost absently, that

one of the bottles had a new label. The *Cordon Bleu* was now entitled *Cordon Jaune*:

"Ye gods," sighed Eddie, "he won't even let in the color in a foreign language!"

He was sipping thoughtfully at a pretty stiff brandy when he heard the scream. "That," he said to himself, dropping the glass to the carpet, "was Anita's voice!"

He'd been so fascinatedly following the trail of Shemley's devotion to duty that he'd quite forgotten what had occasioned his servant's new employment in the first place. When he remembered—still standing frozen over the fallen drink—he groaned and shut his eyes.

"This is monstrous!" he gritted between his teeth. "The man has done the thing *much* too soon! I'd hoped at least for a day or two before he finally cracked. And now, I'll never be able to have the satisfaction of letting Anita know, at the last moment, that *I* was responsible for her demise! . . . Ah, well," he sighed, hurrying toward the east parlor, "at least she has been dispatched, and I am safe from blame. That is *something*, of course—"

At this point in his mutterings, he entered the east parlor. The workers had finished their work, and the new wallpaper was in place on the walls. And, upon the blossom of every single cornflower, in every repetition of the lush pattern, someone had meticulously glued the head of a dandelion. And the dandelions were real, too.

"Good grief," said Eddie, picturing the energies involved in thus depleting the lawn outside. "The man must have worked faster than a reaping machine!" Then he saw what he had come to see: The fallen body of his wife, Anita, sprawled upon the carpet in the center of the parlor. Her gown was disarrayed, and unzipped down the back.

"I wonder how he did it?" said Eddie, tiptoeing over to the still form to check it for stab-wounds, bullet-holes, or possibly axe-dents. However, just as he reached her, Anita shuddered slightly, and twisted herself to a sitting position upon the carpet.

"What happened?" she said, dazed. "I was standing here, admiring the wallpaper, when all at once—" She frowned. "And my back feels so funny . . . "

"Oh, no!" said Eddie, remembering a detail of his wife's flesh that he hadn't realized any of the servants knew. "Turn over!" he cried, furiously. "Turn over and let me see!"

Startled, she nonetheless turned over, and Eddie peered through the open zipper at the region of her spine near the second left floating rib, where she had once possessed a small blue birthmark. It had been painted over with a dark brown stain. "Walnut juice!" gasped Eddie. "It'll be months before it wears off."

Then Anita got her first post-faint look at the walls of the room, and shrieked, "Eddie! My nice new wallpaper! Who could have done such a thing! With *dandelions*!" Her tone implied that she'd have minded less were the usurping flower-heads those of roses or orchids, but Eddie didn't stay around to discuss the matter with her. He was following where his ears were leading, toward a distant sound of crashing and smashing, interspersed with high-pitched maniacal laughter.

Eddie took three flights of stairs at a dead run, and burst into the attic storeroom. There before him, in the process of hacking the blue-tinted tiles from an ancient mosaic coffeetable, stood Shemley, his face palsied with the effort of wielding the short sharp hatchet, his old eyes wild with fanatic urgings, cackling insanely.

"Shemley!" called Eddie, over the shattering sounds. "Shemley, stop that this instant!"

"Don't look! Don't look, sir!" croaked the old man, continuing his chopping, although he tried to interpose his body between the telltale tiles and Eddie's eyes. "Almost done, almost done!" he cackled, an old, mad, wheezing sort of cackle. "Just—" Chunk-chunk! "—a few more—" chunk-chunk! "—pieces!"

"Damn it, *stop*, I say!" exploded Eddie. "You are making my house into a place of noise, wreckage and debris! I will not continue this mad chase, in the wake of your reckless vandalism!"

Shemley, his old face blank, turned to stare at his master. "You have been following me, sir?" he inquired politely, curiously.

"Until," Eddie snorted, "I am blue in the face!"

"Why," smiled Shemley, creeping toward him, "so you are!"

"Ineptitude," testified Anita at the coroner's inquest, "is quite the *least* of one's servant problems!"

The Dead Past

by Al Nussbaum

When he reached the grave, Felix Kurtz sat on a nearby headstone and swore. At eighty-five, age hadn't diminished his ability to unleash a torrent of imaginative profanity; but the cursing did nothing to steady his shaky legs, or remedy his lack of breath, and these were the cause of his anger. Only his own weaknesses could anger him more than the failings of others. His was an active and impatient mind, trapped in a body unable to meet its demands, and he didn't like reminders of the fact.

Fifty years, half a century had passed since the funeral. He hadn't set foot inside the cemetery in all that time, but he'd had no difficulty finding the weed-covered grave with its weather-stained tombstone. When a life has been made up of one huge success followed by another and another, every failure is memorable. He'd always associated Kurtzville, the company town founded by his grandfather, with that early failure, rather than the huge profits the sale of coal had brought during the two world wars. Because of this, he'd been happy when reduced profits forced him to close the mines in the late Forties, and move his business headquarters to Pittsburgh. Now, Kurtzville was the Pennsylvania equivalent of the western ghost towns, and he'd returned to take away one of its citizens.

Of course, he could have delegated the job of supervising the reburial to one of the many vice-presidents of his numerous corporations. Or he could have taken no action at all. The state would have moved the grave along with all the others in the path of the new highway. The illogic of his being there neither escaped him nor troubled him. It had been a long time since he had believed himself to be a rational being. He knew that emotions of one kind or another had always governed his actions and reactions. It was only later, after a decision had been made or a deed had been done, that he had devised reasons for them. In this case, he had no reasons; he simply wanted to be present.

A flat-bed truck, equipped with a winch and boom, turned at the rusted

cemetery gates and bumped along the gravel trail toward Kurtz. As it passed the black limousine where Kurtz's driver was waiting, the man quickly raised his window to keep out the dust and flying stones. It stopped near the grave.

Three workmen climbed down from the cab. While two of them busied themselves removing picks and shovels from the chest behind the cab, the third approached Kurtz. "Mr. Kurtz?" he said. "Which grave is it?"

Kurtz pointed to the grave as the other man approached and they dropped their tools at its foot with a clatter.

The first man squatted beside the headstone and ran his fingers over the dates. "After all this time, there ain't gonna be much left," he said.

"Yes, there will," Kurtz contradicted. "The coffin was cast iron from the foundry in town. It took six strong men to carry it."

"Anyhow, this is gonna take a while, mister. If ya wanna wait in your car, I'll call ya when we're ready to use the winch to lift it."

"Don't take all day—I'm paying you people by the hour, you know," Kurtz said, and turned toward the limousine . . .

From the window of his office overlooking the main entrance to the mine property, Felix Kurtz saw Myron Shay adjust his cravat with nervous fingers as he stated his business to a company policeman. Explanations were unnecessary. Everyone in the company town knew about the artist who had arrived during the excitement of the last cave-in to make drawings for a Washington, D.C. newspaper. They knew too that Kurtz had hired him away from the newspaper on the pretext of having him paint a portrait of his sister Emily, thereby cunningly avoiding publicity which might have resulted in legislation to force expensive safety measures in the mines.

Minutes later a clerk, holding his green eyeshade deferentially at his side, came to say that Myron Shay was downstairs. Kurtz told him to send Shay up. He was pleased by the good fortune, whatever its cause, that had brought Shay to him when he was about to send for him.

Myron Shay was approximately twenty-five, ten years younger than Felix Kurtz, and they differed greatly. Kurtz was tall, powerfully built, and favored dark suits; suitable for trips down into the mines. Shay was slightly built, given to wearing light browns and blues and the bright yellow, ivory-buttoned spats of a dandy. Kurtz combed his black mane straight back and had a large moustache whose ends were stiffly waxed,

while Shay's blond hair was parted neatly in the middle, and his pink face appeared to have no need of a razor.

"I thought you were an accomplished artist," Kurtz said, seizing the initiative. "I thought you said you worked effectively in all mediums."

Shay stood in front of Kurtz's mahogany desk and shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Yes, sir—clay, stone, oils, charcoal—"

"Is it your normal practice to spend over a month on one small likeness?"

"Well, sir, I—"

"No matter, no matter." Kurtz waved him to silence with a gesture of impatience. "I do not propose to pay for your services unless they are completed satisfactorily by Friday of this week." The newspaper artist no longer represented an immediate threat to him, but Kurtz wanted him away before something happened to alter the situation.

"Oh, I wouldn't think of charging you, sir," Myron Shay said.

Kurtz frowned. "What do you mean?"

Shay moved his hands nervously, as a man will who is forced to speak when he is used to expressing himself in other ways. "Your sister and I—Emily and I are in love. We wish to marry. I—I've come to ask your blessing."

Kurtz laughed humorlessly, then stood and came around the desk. "You want to marry *my* sister?"

"Yes, sir. I love her and—"

"Love her? Do you think you're the first man who's pretended an interest in her simply because she's my sister? Well, let me be the first to inform you she is underage and has no funds of her own. And just because I hired you to paint her portrait, don't think I'm unaware of how plain she is."

"Sir! Emily is *not* unattractive, and she's a very warm and sensitive human being."

"Enough of this foolishness! My sister is not going to be tied to any second-rate opportunist. I suppose you think I'll offer you money to stay away from Emily. If you do, you're mistaken. I own this town and everything in it. Nothing happens here without my knowledge and consent."

Kurtz reached out swiftly and grasped one of the artist's wrists in each huge hand. "You're threatening something of mine, so I'll do the same for you." He raised his arms until Shay's long, tapered fingers dangled limply in front of his face. "You have fifteen minutes to return to the loft

you're using for a studio, pack your equipment into your automobile, and take the road out of town. If you fail to leave, I'll have these fingers smashed into sausage meat."

To emphasize his last two words, Kurtz spun the younger man around and pushed him from the room, pausing only long enough to throw open the door. White-faced, Shay walked past the whispering clerks and left the mine offices without looking back.

Kurtz motioned to a clerk and said: "Telephone Miss Kurtz. Tell her to come down here right away."

The man returned in a few minutes. "She isn't at home, Mr. Kurtz. The maid said she went to sit for her portrait."

Kurtz snatched his hat from the rack and left his office, slapping the hat against his right thigh like a riding crop. "I'll be back later," he called over his shoulder, and descended the steps two at a time. He paused at the main gate to order two company policemen to come with him, then signaled for his sedan. Kurtz climbed into the front seat with the driver, and the two company policemen sat in the rear.

When they reached the street where the artist's studio was located, Shay and Emily were pulling away from the curb in an open car. Shay looked back once, then his vehicle picked up speed.

"Catch them! Cut them off!" Kurtz shouted at his driver.

The man pushed the accelerator to the floor, but the large sedan was unable to gain on the smaller automobile. The two vehicles sped along the cobblestone street, and Kurtz pounded the dashboard with his fists. "Stop them!" he shouted. "Stop them!"

The reports of two closely spaced pistol shots crashed above the roar of the racing engines. Kurtz turned in amazement to find one of his policemen leaning from the window of the sedan with his weapon in his hand. Ahead of them, the smaller car swerved once, then slowed and stopped.

Kurtz's driver skidded to a halt behind it, and all four men rushed forward. They found Myron Shay cradling Emily in his arms, while a red stain on her dress grew rapidly larger.

Later, at the company hospital, Dr. Moreau came out of the private room and closed the door quietly behind him, his frown almost hidden on a face already deeply etched by time. Both Kurtz and Shay took steps toward him, but he fixed his bloodshot eyes on the younger man and spoke to him, ignoring Kurtz. They exchanged a few words of rapid

French, then the elderly doctor patted Shay on the shoulder and Shay went to the door of the sickroom.

Kurtz moved to follow, but the doctor stepped in front of him. "How did it happen?" he asked in English.

Kurtz licked his lips. "An accident . . . a sad misunderstanding. Emily was running away with that—that artist! I was trying to overtake them, and one of my policemen thought a crime had been committed."

"I suppose it was young Shay who was going to have the accident—like the other young men you had beaten after they showed an interest in your sister," the doctor said dryly.

The shock was wearing off, and Kurtz didn't like underlings to talk back to him. "Look, you old drunk, don't preach to me. I hired you when no one else would." He didn't mention that he paid the doctor far less than he would have had to pay someone else. "You have only two jobs in this town—taking care of the sick and seeing to it that the dead are buried. Confine yourself to your duties as doctor-mortician, nothing else."

"Yes, sir," the doctor said meekly, but his narrowed eyes glinted.

"Fine. We understand each other. Now, how come you and Shay seem so friendly? Is he a foreigner too?"

"He studied in Paris and speaks French," Moreau explained. "We met when he arrived here and found we have interests in common."

Kurtz stared at the doctor's red-veined nose. "Mutual interests? Like what—whiskey and gin?"

"Chess and conversation," the doctor said. "The French language is well suited to talk of art and literature."

Kurtz waved a finger imperiously under Moreau's nose. "How suited is your English to talk of medicine? What's my sister's condition? How soon can she leave here?"

"The bullet passed through the seat before striking her. It didn't penetrate very deeply, and no vital organ seems to have been damaged, but she lost a great deal of blood," the doctor said. "I wouldn't recommend moving her for at least a week. She must have complete rest—no excitement. Then, if there are no complications . . ." He held one hand out with the palm up in a noncommittal yet pointed gesture.

Kurtz paused. "All right, doctor, but I advise you to stay sober."

The doctor drew himself up stiffly. "I never drink when I have a patient."

"See that you don't," Kurtz said.

The following days were unhappy ones for Felix Kurtz. It was obvious that the news of Emily's accident had spread. Everyone knew he had suffered his first failure—the artist hadn't been frightened away. Whenever Kurtz turned quickly, he caught people smiling at him, and groups of miners fell silent whenever he appeared. Kurtz had known that his employees hated him, but he was mildly surprised to find that his sister's misfortune was a source of amusement because of the embarrassment it caused him.

Kurtz didn't like being laughed at, but for the moment he was helpless to do anything about it: Emily was too sick to leave the hospital, and Myron Shay had virtually moved into the hospital to be near her. Kurtz was forced to postpone his efforts to break up the romance until the girl was stronger. Then he'd see how long he remained an object of ridicule. In the meantime, the looks of fear he got from the young couple during his daily visits made it possible for him to endure his humiliation. Both he and they knew their days together were numbered.

And then the unexpected happened. Ten days after the accident, Kurtz was called to the hospital. He was met by a stone-faced Dr. Moreau, who informed him Emily had died during the night. Kurtz raised the sheet and looked at the still form for a moment; then, completely without a sign of emotion, he ordered Dr. Moreau to make the funeral arrangements.

Myron Shay left town without attending the funeral; thereby proving Kurtz had been correct about him all along . . .

"Mr. Kurtz! Mr. Kurtz!" It was the chauffeur's voice, and Kurtz awoke to find him shaking his arm. "They're ready to lift the coffin."

"Don't shout, you fool. I was merely resting my eyes." He climbed stiffly from the car and joined the workmen at the open grave.

The truck was beside the hole and heavy chains had been fastened to the rusty coffin in preparation for hoisting it to the bed of the truck. Two men were set to operate the winch and boom while the other was in position to guide the coffin.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get on with it. Time is money, you know. And be careful—that's heavy."

"Not as heavy as it was," the foreman said. "There's so much rust in the grave, there can't be more than a thin shell left."

The man waved his hand and the winch began to turn, taking up the

slack in the chain. Then the dull red of the iron coffin rose into the open and swayed gently from the boom while the foreman steadied it with one outstretched arm. Suddenly, the edge of the grave collapsed under the weight of one of the truck's rear wheels. As the wheel dropped, causing the truck to tilt, the coffin swung away, smashed into a nearby headstone, then crashed to the ground.

The men on the truck bed hung onto the winch and stared open-mouthed at the coffin. Kurtz went to it and looked down. A two-foot section of the lid had shattered, revealing the reclining figure of a young woman, wearing the high-necked, long-sleeved fashion of half a century before. One of her ears had been damaged by a piece of the cover, and he touched it with trembling fingers. The wax ear, like all of the dummy's other delicate features, had been formed with loving care by the sensitive hands of an artist.

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The Vietnam Circle

by F. J. Kelly

Bars in Saigon are very functional. There are "bird-watching" bars, where the repressed tourist can sit and watch the local queens parade on the boulevard in their split-paneled, high-necked dresses over white-silk-trouser finery. There are "front parlor" bars to while away the time before going to the back parlor rooms or upstairs. And then there are out-and-out drinking bars, where you sit and drink, without distraction, without the loose-lip clichés of the once-in-a-lifetime tourist trying to convince everyone, particularly himself, that this slice of life is really old hat to him.

The Sugar Cane was a drinking bar. It was quiet, cool and dark. Waiters slid up to the table at the merest signal, quickly and efficiently replacing unwatered drinks. The proprietress was a slim, dainty doll with hardened good looks, a mass of piled-up black hair, slanting, black, snapping eyes, and dressed in the Vietnamese fashion. She sat perched near the cash register, playing solitaire. Intent on the cards, she nonetheless missed nothing going on in the small room. More and more frequently she flicked an eye toward the GI, sitting by himself near the door. Though she knew to the ounce how much he had drunk since his arrival two hours previously, she dismissed him as a man with a problem, drinking his way to a solution. He was quiet, he paid for each drink, he was no trouble. She shrugged and turned back to the cards.

The door opened. Two American soldiers of the Special Forces stood blinking to get their eyes accustomed to the dimness.

"There he is," said the smaller of the two.

"Hey, Robbie," asked the other, "what are you trying to do? Haven't we had enough trouble for one day?" The two newcomers stood staring at the soldier at the bar, who unhurriedly drained his glass and slowly turned in his chair. He looked at them. Despite the heat and their obvious haste, the green berets were perched nattily on their heads, the khaki

uniforms were smartly crisp and unwrinkled, their paratroop boots reflected even the dim lighting of the bar.

"Beat it!" he snapped.

"Robbie, I figure we have just enough time to get to Tan Son Nhut and get on that chopper," pleaded the smaller trooper.

"Come on, Sarge," said the other, a corporal.

"Don't 'sarge' me!" The answer came with an oath. "Just blow out of here and leave me alone!"

The two soldiers looked at each other, and as if by a prearranged signal, one grabbed Robbie's arms, the other snapped a jolting karate chop to Robbie's neck, and Robbie fell forward, unconscious. They looked at the woman behind the register, got a slight negative shake of the head, gripped the slumped form under the arms, and hustled him through the door into a waiting jeep.

The H-21 was bouncing through the thermal layers, with its usual deafening roar. Private Munroe Robson sat staring out the rear door of the chopper, hardly seeing the gunner who blocked most of the view. He rubbed his neck where the karate blow had landed. He admitted ruefully to himself that whatever else he had done, he had gotten that part of the training across. He judged from the changing terrain that the aircraft was only a few minutes away from their mountain camp in the highlands of South Vietnam. The two troopers, Allen and Gentry, who had hauled him from the bar, sat opposite him, elaborately casual and completely unconcerned. Robson paused in his neck massage to notice the darker patch on his sleeve where the staff sergeant stripes had been. Immediately the bitterness welled up. At least these clowns had the sense not to put him on the same chopper with Barclay, he thought gratefully.

This led him off into further musings. After six years with the Special Forces, he reflected, all I have to show for it is a dark patch on my sleeve. Demolitions man, weapons man, intelligence operator, he had been climbing up through the ranks. The Special Forces had been his life since the day he joined the Army. The unorthodox organization, the premium placed on independent and aggressive action, the brutal and dangerous life in the wildest terrain had appealed to his nature. He had long since mastered the art of living off the land. He had a rare knack for getting along with complete strangers. He could show anyone who could see, how to use a rifle, a sub-machine gun, a mortar, a plastic bomb. He was

good and he knew it. He had been the top soldier in the detachment. Until Barclay came along.

The chopper lurched as it started its descent. Robson looked out at the clump of thatched huts built on poles, surrounded by a bamboo fence through which the sharpened spikes had been thrust. A sharply banked moat encircled the area. The moat was trapped at the bottom with ponjii spears, short, sharpened, pointed lengths of bamboo, firmly embedded in the floor of the moat. One gate was provided at the east end of the compound. As Robson looked, the first of the two choppers dipped into the compound. The mountain people were running from all corners of the compound to greet them. Then both choppers were on the ground, blades still whirling, anxious to depart for home station.

Lieutenant Higgs stood by the pad waiting for the men to alight. He was new to this camp but not new to the job or the country. He had been sent to take over the detachment when the former commander died in an ambush, a rugged, squat, bull-like man, quick to size up a friend or an opponent. He was dressed in the camouflage suit, paratroop boots, and beret which was the working uniform in camp.

Robson saw Barclay jump from the chopper, and trot over to where the officer stood. Barclay was a big man, knotty-shouldered, with a deep chest and big arms and hands. Towering over the lieutenant, he saluted, answered quickly and tersely a few questions, saluted again, and moved off toward the detachment hut. The lieutenant looked over toward Robson, started to shout, gave up as the helicopter motors began to roar, pointed for Robson to follow him, and strode off through the cloud of dust.

Robson climbed the rough ladder leading to the longhouse which served as office, communications room, warehouse, and sleeping quarters for the detachment. It stood perched some six feet off the ground, supported by upright logs. This perching provided a degree of protection against marauding animals, snakes, flooding from torrential rains, and crawling insects. Though less protection was necessary because of the presence of the fence, the lifelong construction habits of the mountain people dictated this form of building. The troopers lived in the rear half, with a partition of sorts separating the officers from the men. Other reed partitions divided the remainder of the space functionally.

The office, into which Robson followed the lieutenant, consisted of a field desk, some folding chairs, and a crude map-board. Robson stood

rigidly at attention. "Sit down, Robson," the lieutenant invited, waving a hand at a chair. He settled into a chair as Robson drew up a folding chair and sat stiffly before him.

"Well, what do we do now?" he asked.

"How do you mean, sir?"

"I mean about the remaining time you have here in the detachment, that's what I mean."

"Well, sir, I figured that since I have only twelve days to go, I'd continue as the weapons man until my replacement arrives."

"Robson," said the lieutenant, "I wasn't assigned here when this trouble began. All I know is what I learned from reading the reports and statements and the charge sheets." He offered a pack of cigarettes to the soldier, was refused, and lit up.

"As I understand it," he resumed, "Barclay, as the senior NCO, put out an order that members of the detachment would not go out on operational patrols or raids trying to get prisoners or inflicting casualties. Obviously, Barclay got that order from the captain; in fact, he told me so. He surprised you and several of the Vietnamese soldiers coming back into the compound after a raiding patrol. You had gone without permission, without authority, and in direct disobedience to the order. When Barclay called you on it, you got all worked up about it and read him off."

"He had no call to sound off in front of the Vietnamese," muttered Robson. "I just went out with them to keep an eye on them. See how they operated at night."

"How come your rifle was fired?" the lieutenant countered. "It was no secret you and that Vietnamese lead scout, Tuang, were hot to get yourselves some Viet Cong."

"I hate the VC," said Robson viciously. "When you've been here longer, you'll see the villages burning, the rice crops destroyed, the men kidnapped, and the women and children killed. You'll see—"

"I know what I'll see," interrupted Higgins. "There's a reason to keep us out of these scrapes and you could have got us into a beaut!"

"Lieutenant," Robson's eyes were slits. "I lived through a village raid by the Viet Cong. They infiltrated at night, the villagers were slaughtered, and the captain caught a burst in the face. Don't tell me about VC's."

"I'm not telling you about VC's," snapped the lieutenant, "I'm telling you how it will be here for the next twelve days. You're the best weapons

man we have. But, as much as I need you, I don't want any more difficulties here. I agreed to take you back after the court-martial because of your work and your record and your own request to come back. But you'll be out of here in jig time if you don't behave. And that includes Barclay, understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied Robson. *I also understand how yellow Barclay is,* he thought.

"What will you do when you go back to the States?" asked the lieutenant, seeking to ease the tension.

"I'm not sure," Robson replied. "I had intended to re-up, and get married. That's all out the window now."

"Why do you say that?"

"Even if my girl would marry me, I'm not about to start a family as a buck private. No, I had enough of that kind of hand-to-mouth living as a kid."

"Your girl won't care if you are a sergeant or not."

"No; Lieutenant, she wouldn't—but I do," cut in Robson, with chilling effect.

"Well, we'll see how it works out, Robson," said the lieutenant. "Perhaps I can get you one stripe back before you leave, or at least write to your new outfit." Robson said nothing.

"When you look at it another way, Robson, you could have been creamed by that court. After all, you got off with a fine and losing your stripes, when you could have drawn some time in jail."

Robson's mouth went taut. "Yes, sir, I sure feel grateful. All I was doing was out getting the enemy, and I lost my stripes and my marriage and my time in the Army."

The lieutenant stood up, signaling an end to the interview. Robson stood quietly and alertly.

"O.K., Robson," he sighed. "Perhaps this isn't the time to discuss it. But I'm passing you the word. I have enough trouble with Viet Cong outside the fence, without trouble between you and Barclay inside it. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Robson. He saluted, about-faced, and left the hut.

The next few days passed calmly enough. Barclay took pains to treat Robson in exactly the proper fashion. An outsider would never have guessed the violent fury in Robson's thoughts as he went about his duties. He took to spending more and more time at the firing ranges cut into the

side of the hill about two hundred yards from the gate of the compound. Tuang, the lead scout, found many occasions to drop by and polish up his meager English. Tuang couldn't understand the extent of the trouble, but he knew all was not as before. It was the day Tuang showed Robson his snares and traps set up along the edge of the rice field that the plan began to form in Robson's mind.

Several days later, during the morning operations briefing, Barclay announced the details for the next several days. Robson's head snapped up at one announcement; Barclay and Robson, along with a squad of Vietnamese, would man the forward-observation post two nights later, from dusk to dawn. Barclay included the usual comment that personnel on the night shifts at the forward observation post would wear the black shirt usually worn by peasants to cut down the chances of being spotted. Robson set off to his ranges as rapidly as he could.

After the morning firing, he walked into the surrounding jungle and searched the thicket until he found signs of animal passage. He quickly set up a snare, restored the area to as close a natural setting as possible, and returned to the range. Later that afternoon he found a small, fat rabbit caught in the snare. He took the frightened animal, hurried to the farthest corner of the rice field, staked out the rabbit, and completed his preparations. Skipping breakfast the following morning, he checked out the trap and found a contented, bulging, banded krait coiled around the remains of the rabbit.

He approached the trap gingerly. The banded krait, though only about two feet long, is a deadly killer. Generally nonaggressive, the krait is a vicious enemy when aroused or irritated. The alternating bands of yellow and black are highly distinctive and easily spotted. The krait, as with most poisonous snakes, usually moves and feeds by night, Robson knew. Right now, this specimen was not too upset at being entrapped, though Robson knew he would be once the effects of the meal had worn off.

Robson circled him carefully, then gently—but firmly placed a forked stick behind the head. Even then, the krait barely wriggled. Robson bent, seized the krait firmly behind the head, dropped the stick and, in one motion, dropped the snake into a cloth sack he carried, which he then firmly knotted. He returned to the range area and hung the sack from a branch, out of sight of any chance visitors to the range.

Just before supper that night, when he knew Barclay would be busy with the Vietnamese NCO's, Robson casually strolled past Barclay's bunk.

After inspecting the area and observing no one in view, Robson picked up the black peasant shirt from Barclay's chair, walked back to his own bunk, and stuffed the shirt under his blanket. Considerably cheered, he went off to supper.

The following morning, he looked up Tuang and asked to borrow a cooking pot, specifying he wanted one with a lid. Tuang, a little surprised at such a strange request, delivered the pot, which was big enough to cook a good-sized chicken, to Robson at the firing range.

Robson set the pot on a large flat rock, then placed the black shirt inside it. He retrieved the snake bag, and dumped the snake into the pot. He had only a flash glimpse of the snake in the pot alongside the shirt before he slammed the lid into place.

Well, buster, he thought, you'll be really cranked up about that shirt. Robson's training and experience with snakes had taught him that poisonous snakes, if irritated, would blindly strike at whatever had been associated with the irritation. Robson knew that if the krait ever got near that shirt again, smelled the characteristic smell of that shirt, the snake would lash out in all its fury at the object which the snake associated with its torment.

During the afternoon, Robson returned to the pot, carefully upended it and gradually inched back the lid until the snake slid out into the bag. He fastened the bag tightly and set it aside. He removed the black shirt from the pot, folded the shirt inside his own, picked up the snake bag, and started back to camp. He hid the snake bag on the trail near the outpost, and then hurried to the compound.

His timing was perfect. Most of the detachment were already at supper. He took the black shirt and draped it on a chair next to Barclay's bed. Not too obvious, he thought, and walked out to the mess tent.

The forward observation post was really two lookout stations built on top of an earthen room. The room was sunk into the ground for several feet, boards and packed earth constituted the ceiling. Machine gun stations occupied a firing position in each wall. A walkie-talkie radio provided contact with the main compound. A ladder permitted ascent to a narrow trench passageway which led, in turn, to the two stations on top. Each station resembled a cut-down phone booth. The booths reached nearly to a man's chest. Lookouts had an open view on all four sides. Standing as it did in the broiling sun, the observation post was always a sweat box, with the lookout stations perhaps the hottest part of all.

The squad assembled in the dim twilight outside the OP.

"When we are inside, I want no lights, no talking, no noise," said Barclay. The interpreter sing-songed this order to the squad. Heads bobbed.

"If you see anything of the Viet Cong, tell Robson or me." The interpreter rattled on.

"Once in position, nobody moves, nobody talks." More sing-song, more heads bobbing.

"Robson and I will look together until night falls. Viet Cong attack at any time. Don't take chances—report everything," Barclay concluded.—Though not fully comprehending, the squad moved into the bunker room.

"Come on, Robbie," said Barclay. "I want to tell you something before we get up in the posts."

"I just want to finish this smoke," said Robson, not meeting his eyes. "I'll be right along."

"All right," said Barclay, "but step on it. We'll have trouble getting up the ladder in a few minutes." Barclay went inside. Robson heard him talking to the machine gunners, and heard ammo boxes being moved. Robson sped down the trail to where he had cached the snake bag. He was sure he was not seen in the diminishing light, especially dressed in his black peasant shirt.

He secured the bag, ran back to the door of the bunker, and called Barclay. The interpreter said softly that Barclay had gone up to the lookout station.

Robson climbed the ladder quickly, feeling the bag shake in his hand as the snake began to move. He found his footing in the passageway and sidled down a step or two toward his station.

With his foot, he flipped over the grass cover closing off the ladder access to the stations.

The entire post settled down to watchful waiting. He had two hours before a relief shift came up. The lookout booth was stifling. Even at night, the heat caused the sweat to pour. He looked out at the countryside. He looked, and counted to himself, and looked some more. After an hour, he bent to his knees and carefully picked up the bundle of death. He inched gently into the passageway for a foot or two, unwrapped the fastening fold, and upended the bag in the direction of Barclay's station. He then edged back to his own station, balled up the bag, and flung it out into the blackness. . .

The compound was steeped in gloom. The normally noisy, cheerfully grinning Vietnamese walked in tiptoe quiet as if to avoid offending the spirits of death. Peasants walked with eyes rooted on the ground, lifting their heads only to shoot a fearful glance at the longhouse where Barclay's body now lay. The death of Barclay was the prime topic in every little cluster of Vietnamese. They had looked on Barclay as a friend. They were looking now to see what would be done.

Lieutenant Higgins had set a guard at each end of the longhouse. The Special Forces troopers stood in stony silence. Directly Barclay's body had been found, the lieutenant had radioed the base camp, and had received instructions to await the arrival of the deputy commander, Major Flynn. He arrived in a light observation plane shortly after dawn, hurried to the longhouse, and was closeted with Lieutenant Higgins for almost an hour. They both emerged to visit the outpost, and then returned to the office. The parade of witnesses began, ending, finally, with Robson. Robson stoically denied any knowledge of the death, and carefully and accurately provided all the details up to the time he and Barclay had assumed their posts in the lookout towers.

No, he hadn't heard an outcry. No, he had not been aware of anyone on the ladder. No, he had not talked to Barclay at all, once they ascended to the towers. No, he didn't know what Barclay intended to tell him, referring to Barclay's comment just before entering the outpost. No, no, no. Robson was excused.

Minutes later, both officers walked through the compound toward the little plane. The villagers watched. After the plane took off, Robson was summoned to the detachment office. When he walked in, he found the lieutenant pacing slowly behind the desk. He reported, and stood at a brace. Higgins waved him at ease.

"Robson, have I missed anything about this case?"

"I don't know what you mean, sir."

The lieutenant was silent a moment. Finally, as if reaching a hard decision, he squared around, leaned on his knuckles on the desk, and looked at Robson bleakly.

"I have missed something, but I'm damned if I can put my finger on it. There's something out of focus, but I can't lock on to it. Well, that's neither here nor there. The Major has decided to hold the formal inquiry at the Tan Son Nhut airbase tomorrow. He will want you there. A chopper will be here in the morning. You can be escort for Barclay to the airbase.

His body is being returned to the States. Something wrong, Robson?" he asked.

"No, sir, I just was surprised you picked me," Robson stammered.

"I didn't 'pick' you, Robson," the lieutenant continued. "I can't spare anyone here. Since you have to go to testify, you can be the escort. One other thing, take all your gear with you. Since you have only a few days, you are to be sent home after the investigation."

Robson opened his mouth, started to say something, then shut it again.

"You will be ready to leave first thing in the morning. I'm going over to check on the coffin they are making for Barclay. Care to come along?"

"No, thank you," said Robson.

"O.K. then—move out," snapped Higgins.

When Robson left, he avoided the villagers standing near the long-house. He hurried out to the range area and collected his few belongings there. He picked up the pot he had borrowed from Tuang and set out to return it to him. He found Tuang in the quarters area of the compound.

Tuang was obviously upset. Robson handed him the pot, some cigarettes, a handful of piasters, soap, and other odds and ends. Tuang, who normally would have been grinning from ear to ear at such a windfall, just looked morosely at his loot.

"What's wrong, Tuang?"

"Everything, everything. Barclay dead—snake spirit loose—all wrong, all wrong." Tuang dropped into the typical heel-squatting posture of the mountain man. He rocked slowly back and forth.

Robson looked at him in silence. He knew the Montagnards were animists, if indeed they had any religion at all. The spirits of the dead, the ancestors, were inextricably wound up in the living, the animal world, the symbolism of nature projected into the world beyond.

"Well, Tuang, I go tomorrow morning," said Robson. "The Major wants me to go with Barclay to Tan Son Nhut."

"You come back?" asked Tuang.

"No, I do not come back," said Robson.

Tuang rocked some more, groaning and grimacing.

The compound was alive all night. The rude coffin of boards, lashed together with native ropes, was finished. A rough bed of boughs and branches was placed in the box to cushion Barclay's remains. The body was installed, but Higgins ordered the lid to be left free until just before take-off. The villagers ranged the compound all night. Groups patrolled

out into the surrounding jungle until dawn. Giant fires burned, drums tattooed without interruption. The Vietnamese women keened and moaned alternatively in sorrow for the dead soldier.

Robson spent the greater part of the night tossing and turning, while the minutes crept by. He was packed and ready to move out long before the dawn stole into the valley. He went outside and strained his eyes and ears into the morning stillness, as if trying to hurry the chopper.

The H-21 could be heard even before it was seen. It settled down like a tired whale, blades swishing clouds of dust. The two pilots and the crew chief were anxious to get off.

Lieutenant Higgins ordered the coffin to be brought to the chopper. The villagers grouped around in a tight circle. The lid was removed, and each trooper walked to the coffin to say his own farewell. The Montagnards hung back. The lid was replaced. The coffin was lifted into the chopper and lashed to the floor of the cargo compartment. A flurry of activity occurred near the compound gate, as Robson swung aboard the aircraft.

The tribal chief now walked forward carrying a small wooden case. He walked to the door of the aircraft, presented the box to Robson, bowed formally, and backed away. Robson was obviously pleased with the gift. He stood in the door, smiling, while the chopper coughed to life, gathered itself and lurched into the air. Those on the ground could see him fumbling with the box to open it.

"What was in that box, Tuang, and why did the chief give Robson a present?" asked Lieutenant Higgins. The chopper was disappearing to the south.

"When a Montagnard dies, that which causes him to die must go with him," said Tuang, "or he has no peace in his grave. We searched all night for the brother of Barclay's killer. That is what was in the box."

"But Robson thought—" began Lieutenant Higgins. He broke off to look up at the new sound in the air.

The helicopter was coming back.



Sadie When She Died

by Ed McBain

"I'm very glad she's dead," the man said.

He wore a homburg, muffler, overcoat, and gloves. He stood near the night table, a tall man with a narrow face, and a well-groomed grey moustache that matched the greying hair at his temples. His eyes were clear and blue and distinctly free of pain or grief.

Detective Steve Carella wasn't sure he had heard the man correctly. "Sir," Carella said, "I'm sure I don't have to tell you—"

"That's right," the man said, "you don't have to tell me. It happens I'm a criminal lawyer and am well aware of my rights. My wife was no good, and I'm delighted someone killed her."

Carella opened his pad. This was not what a bereaved husband was supposed to say when his wife lay disemboweled on the bedroom floor in a pool of her own blood.

"Your name is Gerald Fletcher."

"That's correct."

"Your wife's name, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Sarah. Sarah Fletcher."

"Want to tell me what happened?"

"I got home about fifteen minutes ago. I called to my wife from the front door, and got no answer. I came into the bedroom and found her dead on the floor. I immediately called the police."

"Was the room in this condition when you came in?"

"It was."

"Touch anything?"

"Nothing. I haven't moved from this spot since I placed the call."

"Anybody in here when you came in?"

"Not a soul. Except my wife, of course."

"Is that your suitcase in the entrance hallway?"

"It is. I was on the Coast for three days. An associate of mine needed

advice on a brief he was preparing. What's your name?"

"Carella. Detective Steve Carella."

"I'll remember that."

While the police photographer was doing his macabre little jig around the body to make sure the lady looked good in the rushes, or as good as any lady *can* look in her condition, a laboratory assistant named Marshall Davies was in the kitchen of the apartment, waiting for the medical examiner to pronounce the lady dead, at which time Davies would go into the bedroom and with delicate care remove the knife protruding from the blood and slime of the lady, in an attempt to salvage some good latent prints from the handle of the murder weapon.

Davies was a new technician, but an observant one, and he noticed that the kitchen window was wide open, not exactly usual on a December night when the temperature outside hovered at twelve degrees. Leaning over the sink, he further noticed that the window opened onto a fire escape on the rear of the building. He could not resist speculating that perhaps someone had climbed up the fire escape and then into the kitchen.

Since there was a big muddy footprint in the kitchen sink, another one on the floor near the sink, and several others fading as they traveled across the waxed kitchen floor to the living room, Davies surmised that he was onto something hot. Wasn't it possible that an intruder *had* climbed over the window sill, into the sink, and walked across the room, bearing the switchblade knife that had later been pulled viciously across the lady's abdomen from left to right? If the M.E. ever got through with the damn body, the boys of the 87th would be halfway home, thanks to Marshall Davies. He felt pretty good.

The three points of the triangle were Detective-Lieutenant Byrnes, and Detectives Meyer Meyer and Steve Carella. Fletcher sat in a chair, still wearing homburg, muffler, overcoat, and gloves as if he expected to be called outdoors at any moment. The interrogation was being conducted in a windowless cubicle labeled Interrogation Room.

The cops standing in their loose triangle around Gerald Fletcher were amazed but not too terribly amused by his brutal frankness.

"I hated her guts," he said.

"Mr. Fletcher," Lieutenant Byrnes said, "I *still* feel I must warn you that a woman has been murdered—"

"Yes. My dear, wonderful wife," Fletcher said sarcastically.

"... which is a serious crime . . ." Byrnes felt tongue-tied in Fletcher's presence. Bullet-headed, hair turning from iron-grey to ice-white, blue-eyed, built like a compact linebacker, Byrnes looked to his colleagues for support. Both Meyer and Carella were watching their shoelaces.

"You have warned me repeatedly," Fletcher said. "I can't imagine why. My wife is dead—someone killed her—but it was not I."

"Well, it's nice to have your assurance of that, Mr. Fletcher, but this alone doesn't necessarily still our doubts," Carella said, hearing the words and wondering where the hell they were coming from. He was, he realized, trying to impress Fletcher. He continued, "How do we know it *wasn't* you who stabbed her?"

"To begin with," Fletcher said, "there were signs of forcible entry in the kitchen and hasty departure in the bedroom, witness the wide-open window in the aforementioned room and the shattered window in the latter. The drawers in the dining-room sideboard were open—"

"You're very observant," Meyer said suddenly. "Did you notice all this in the four minutes it took you to enter the apartment and call the police?"

"It's my *job* to be observant," Fletcher said. "But to answer your question, no. I noticed all this *after* I had spoken to Detective Carella here."

Wearily, Byrnes dismissed Fletcher, who then left the room.

"What do you think?" Byrnes said.

"I think he did it," Carella said.

"Even with all those signs of a burglary?"

"Especially with those signs. He could have come home, found his wife stabbed—but not fatally—and finished her off by yanking the knife across her belly. Fletcher had four minutes, when all he needed was maybe four seconds."

"It's possible," Meyer said.

"Or maybe I just don't like the guy," Carella said.

"Let's see what the lab comes up with," Byrnes said.

The laboratory came up with good fingerprints on the kitchen window sash and on the silver drawer of the dining-room sideboard. There were good prints on some of the pieces of silver scattered on the floor near the smashed bedroom window. Most important, there were good prints on the handle of the switchblade knife. The prints matched; they had all been left by the same person.

Gerald Fletcher graciously allowed the police to take *his* fingerprints, which were then compared with those Marshall Davies had sent over from the police laboratory. The fingerprints on the window sash, the drawer, the silverware, and the knife did not match Gerald Fletcher's.

Which didn't mean a damn thing if he had been wearing his gloves when he'd finished her off.

On Monday morning, in the second-floor rear apartment of 721 Silvermine Oval, a chalked outline on the bedroom floor was the only evidence that a woman had lain there in death the night before. Carella sidestepped the outline and looked out the shattered window at the narrow alleyway below. There was a distance of perhaps twelve feet between this building and the one across from it.

Conceivably, the intruder could have leaped across the shaftway, but this would have required premeditation and calculation. The more probable likelihood was that the intruder had fallen to the pavement below.

"That's quite a long drop," Detective Bert Kling said, peering over Carella's shoulder.

"How far do you figure?" Carella asked.

"Thirty feet. At least."

"Got to break a leg taking a fall like that. You think he went through the window headfirst?"

"How else?"

"He might have broken the glass out first, then gone through," Carella suggested.

"If he was about to go to all that trouble, why didn't he just *open* the damn thing?"

"Well, let's take a look," Carella said.

They examined the latch and the sash. Kling grabbed both handles on the window frame and pulled up on them. "Stuck."

"Probably painted shut," Carella said.

"Maybe he *did* try to open it. Maybe he smashed it only when he realized it was stuck."

"Yeah," Carella said. "And in a big hurry, too. Fletcher was opening the front door, maybe already in the apartment by then."

"The guy probably had a bag or something with him, to put the loot in. He must have taken a wild swing with the bag when he realized the window was stuck, and maybe some of the stuff fell out, which would

explain the silverware on the floor. Then he probably climbed through the hole and dropped down feet first. In fact, what he could've done, Steve, was drop the bag down first, and *then* climbed out and hung from the sill before he jumped, to make it a shorter distance."

"I don't know if he had all that much time, Bert. He must have heard that front door opening, and Fletcher coming in and calling to his wife. Otherwise, he'd have taken his good, sweet time and gone out the kitchen window and down the fire escape, the way he'd come in."

Kling nodded reflectively. "Let's take a look at that alley," Carella said.

In the alleyway outside, Carella and Kling studied the concrete pavement, and then looked up at the shattered second-floor window of the Fletcher apartment.

"Where do you suppose he'd have landed?" Kling said.

"Right about where we're standing," Carella looked at the ground. "I don't know, Bert. A guy drops twenty feet to a concrete pavement, doesn't break anything, gets up, dusts himself off, and runs the fifty-yard dash, right?" Carella shook his head. "My guess is he stayed right where he was to catch his breath, giving Fletcher time to look out the window, which would be the natural thing to do, but which Fletcher didn't."

"He was anxious to call the police."

"I still think he did it."

"Steve, be reasonable. If a guy's fingerprints are on the handle of a knife, and the knife is still in the victim—"

"And if the victim's husband realizes what a sweet setup he's stumbled into, wife lying on the floor with a knife in her, place broken into and burglarized, why *not* finish the job and hope the burglar will be blamed?"

"Sure," Kling said. "Prove it."

"I can't," Carella said. "Not until we catch the burglar."

While Carella and Kling went through the tedious routine of retracing the burglar's footsteps, Marshall Davies called the 87th Precinct and got Detective Meyer.

"I think I've got some fairly interesting information about the suspect," Davies said. "He left latent fingerprints all over the apartment and footprints in the kitchen. A very good one in the sink, when he climbed in through the window, and some middling-fair ones tracking across the kitchen floor to the dining room. I got some excellent pictures and some good blowups of the heel."

"Good," Meyer said.

"But more important," Davies went on, "I got a good walking picture from the footprints on the floor. If a man is walking slowly, the distance between his footprints is usually about twenty-seven inches. Forty for running, thirty-five for fast walking. These were thirty-two inches. So we have a man's usual gait, moving quickly, but not in a desperate hurry, with the walking line normal and not broken."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, a walking line should normally run along the inner edge of a man's heelprints. Incidentally, the size and type of shoe and angle of the foot clearly indicate that this *was* a man."

"O.K., fine," Meyer said. He did not thus far consider Davies' information valuable nor even terribly important.

"Anyway, none of this is valuable nor even terribly important," Davies said, "until we consider the rest of the data. The bedroom window was smashed, and the Homicide men were speculating that the suspect had jumped through the window into the alley below. I went down to get some meaningful pictures, and got some pictures of where he must have landed—on both feet, incidentally—and I got another walking picture and direction line. He moved toward the basement door and into the basement. But the important thing is that our man is injured, and I think badly."

"How do you know?" Meyer asked.

"The walking picture downstairs is entirely different from the one in the kitchen. When he got downstairs he was leaning heavily on the left leg and dragging the right. I would suggest that whoever's handling the case put out a physicians' bulletin. If this guy hasn't got a broken leg, I'll eat the pictures I took."

A girl in a green coat was waiting in the apartment lobby when Carella and Kling came back in, still retracing footsteps, or trying to. The girl said, "Excuse me, are you the detectives?"

"Yes," Carella said.

"The super told me you were in the building," the girl said. "You're investigating the Fletcher murder, aren't you?" She was quite soft-spoken.

"How can we help you, miss?" Carella asked.

"I saw somebody in the basement last night, with blood on his clothes."

Carella glanced at Kling and immediately said, "What time was this?"

"About a quarter to eleven," the girl said.

"What were you doing in the basement?"

The girl looked surprised.

"That's where the washing machines are. I'm sorry, my name is Selma Bernstein. I live here in the building."

"Tell us what happened, will you?" Carella said.

"I was sitting by the machine, watching the clothes tumble, which is simply *fascinating*, you know, when the door leading to the back yard opened—the door to the alley. This man came down the stairs, and I don't even think he saw me. He went straight for the stairs at the other end, the ones that go up into the street. I never saw him before last night."

"Can you describe him?" Carella asked.

"Sure. He was about twenty-one or twenty-two, your height and weight, well, maybe a little bit shorter, five ten or eleven, brown hair."

Kling was already writing. The man was white, wore dark trousers, high-topped sneakers, and a poplin jacket with blood on the right sleeve and on the front. He carried a small red bag, "like one of those bags the airlines give you."

Selma didn't know if he had any scars. "He went by in pretty much of a hurry, considering he was dragging his right leg. I think he was hurt pretty badly."

What they had in mind, of course, was identification from a mug shot, but the I.S. reported that none of the fingerprints in their file matched the ones found in the apartment. So the detectives figured it was going to be a tough one, and they sent out a bulletin to all of the city's doctors just to prove it.

Just to prove that cops can be as wrong as anyone else, it turned out to be a nice easy one after all.

The call came from a physician in Riverhead at 4:37 that afternoon, just as Carella was ready to go home.

"This is Dr. Mendelsohn," he said. "I have your bulletin here, and I want to report treating a man early this morning who fits your description—a Ralph Corwin of 894 Woodside in Riverhead. He had a bad ankle sprain."

"Thank you, Dr. Mendelsohn," Carella said.

Carella pulled the Riverhead directory from the top drawer of his desk and quickly flipped to the C's. He did not expect to find a listing for Ralph Corwin. A man would have to be a rank amateur to burglarize an apartment without wearing gloves, then stab a woman to death, and then give his name when seeking treatment for an injury sustained in escaping from the murder apartment.

Ralph Corwin was apparently a rank amateur. His name was in the phone book, and he'd given the doctor his correct address.

Carella and Kling kicked in the door without warning, fanning into the room, guns drawn. The man on the bed was wearing only undershorts. His right ankle was taped.

"Are you Ralph Corwin?" Carella asked.

"Yes," the man said. His face was drawn, the eyes in pain.

"Get dressed, Corwin. We want to ask you some questions."

"There's nothing to ask," he said and turned his head into the pillow. "I killed her."

Ralph Corwin made his confession in the presence of two detectives of the 87th, a police stenographer, an assistant district attorney, and a lawyer appointed by the Legal Aid Society.

Corwin was the burglar. He'd entered 721 Silvermine Oval on Sunday night, December twelfth, down the steps from the street where the garbage cans were. He went through the basement, up the steps at the other end, into the back yard, and climbed the fire escape, all at about ten o'clock in the evening. Corwin entered the Fletcher apartment because it was the first one he saw without lights. He figured there was nobody home. The kitchen window was open a tiny crack; Corwin squeezed his fingers under the bottom and opened it all the way. He was pretty desperate at the time because he was a junkie in need of cash. He swore that he'd never done anything like this before.

The man from the D.A.'s office was conducting the Q. and A. and asked Corwin if he hadn't been afraid of fingerprints, not wearing gloves. Corwin figured that was done only in the movies, and anyway, he said, he didn't own gloves.

Corwin used a tiny flashlight to guide him as he stepped into the sink and down to the floor. He made his way to the dining room, emptied the drawer of silverware into his airline bag. Then he looked for the bedroom,

scouting for watches and rings, whatever he could take in the way of jewelry. "I'm not a pro," he said. "I was just hung up real bad and needed some bread to tide me over."

Now came the important part. The D.A.'s assistant asked Corwin what happened in the bedroom.

A. There was a lady in bed. This was only like close to ten-thirty, you don't expect nobody to be asleep so early.

Q. But there was a woman in bed.

A. Yeah. She turned on the light the minute I stepped in the room.

Q. What did you do?

A. I had a knife in my pocket. I pulled it out to scare her. It was almost comical. She looks at me and says, "What are you doing here?"

Q. Did you say anything to her?

A. I told her to keep quiet, that I wasn't going to hurt her. But she got out of bed and I saw she was reaching for the phone. That's got to be crazy, right? A guy is standing there in your bedroom with a knife in his hand, so she reaches for the phone.

Q. What did you do?

A. I grabbed her hand before she could get it. I pulled her off the bed, away from the phone, you know? And I told her again that nobody was going to hurt her, that I was getting out of there right away, to just please calm down.

Q. What happened next?

A. She started to scream. I told her to stop. I was beginning to panic. I mean she was really yelling.

Q. Did she stop?

A. No.

Q. What did you do?

A. I stabbed her.

Q. Where did you stab her?

A. I don't know. It was a reflex. She was yelling, I was afraid the whole building would come down. I just . . . I just stuck the knife in her. I was very scared. I stabbed her in the belly. Someplace in the belly.

Q. How many times did you stab her?

A. Once. She . . . she backed away from me. I'll never forget the look on her face. And she . . . she fell on the floor.

Q. Would you look at this photograph, please?

A. Oh, no . . .

Q. Is that the woman you stabbed?

A. Oh, no . . . I didn't think . . . Oh, no!

A moment after he stabbed Sarah Fletcher, Corwin heard the door opening and someone coming in. The man yelled, "Sarah, it's me, I'm home." Corwin ran past Sarah's body on the floor, and tried to open the window, but it was stuck. He smashed it with his airline bag, threw the bag out first to save the swag because, no matter what, he knew he'd need another fix, and he climbed through the broken window, cutting his hand on a piece of glass. He hung from the sill, and finally let go, dropping to the ground. He tried to get up, and fell down again. His ankle was killing him, his hand bleeding. He stayed in the alley nearly fifteen minutes, then finally escaped via the route Selma Bernstein had described to Carella and Kling. He took the train to Riverhead and got to Dr. Mendelsohn at about nine in the morning. He read of Sarah Fletcher's murder in the newspaper on the way back from the doctor.

On Tuesday, December 14, which was the first of Carella's two days off that week, he received a call at home from Gerald Fletcher. Fletcher told the puzzled Carella that he'd gotten his number from a friend in the D.A.'s office, complimented Carella and the boys of the 87th on their snappy detective work, and invited Carella to lunch at the Golden Lion at one o'clock. Carella wasn't happy about interrupting his Christmas shopping, but this was an unusual opportunity, and he accepted.

Most policemen in the city for which Carella worked did not eat very often in restaurants like the Golden Lion. Carella had never been inside. A look at the menu posted on the window outside would have frightened him out of six months' pay. The place was a faithful replica of the dining room of an English coach house, circa 1627: huge oaken beams, immaculate white cloths, heavy silver.

Gerald Fletcher's table was in a secluded corner of the restaurant. He rose as Carella approached, extended his hand, and said, "Glad you could make it. Sit down, won't you?"

Carella shook Fletcher's hand, and then sat. He felt extremely uncomfortable, but he couldn't tell whether his discomfort was caused by the room or by the man with whom he was dining.

"Would you care for a drink?" Fletcher asked.

"Well, are you having one?" Carella asked.

"Yes, I am."

"I'll have a Scotch and soda," Carella said. He was not used to drinking at lunch.

Fletcher signaled the waiter and ordered the drinks, making his another whiskey sour.

When the drinks came, Fletcher raised his glass. "Here's to a conviction," he said.

Carella lifted his own glass. "I don't expect there'll be any trouble," he said. "It looks airtight to me."

Both men drank. Fletcher dabbed his lips with a napkin and said, "You never can tell these days. I hope you're right, though." He sipped at the drink. "I must admit I feel a certain amount of sympathy for him."

"Do you?"

"Yes. If he's an addict, he's automatically entitled to pity. And when one considers that the woman he murdered was nothing but a—"

"Mr. Fletcher . . ."

"Gerry, please. And I know: it isn't very kind of me to malign the dead. I'm afraid you didn't know my wife, though, Mr. Carella. May I call you Steve?"

"Sure."

"My enmity might be a bit more understandable if you had. Still, I shall take your advice. She's dead, and no longer capable of hurting me, so why be bitter. Shall we order, Steve?"

Fletcher suggested that Carella try either the trout *au meuniere* or the beef and kidney pie, both of which were excellent. Carella ordered prime ribs, medium rare, and a mug of beer.

As the men ate and talked, something began happening, or at least Carella *thought* something was happening; he might never be quite sure. The conversation with Fletcher seemed on the surface to be routine chatter, but rushing through this inane, polite discussion was an undercurrent that caused excitement, fear, and apprehension. As they spoke, Carella knew with renewed certainty that Gerald Fletcher had killed his wife. Without ever being told so, he knew it. *This* was why Fletcher had called this morning; *this* was why Fletcher had invited him to lunch; *this* was why he prattled on endlessly while every contradictory move of his body signaled on an almost extrasensory level that he *knew* Carella suspected him of murder, and was here to *tell* Carella (*without* telling him) that, "Yes, you stupid cop, I killed my wife. However much the evidence may point to another man, however many confessions you get, I killed

her and I'm glad I killed her.. And there isn't a damn thing you can do about it."

Ralph Corwin was being held before trial in the city's oldest prison, known to law enforcers and lawbreakers alike as Calcutta. Neither Corwin's lawyer nor the district attorney's office felt that allowing Carella to talk to the prisoner would be harmful to the case.

Corwin was expecting him. "What did you want to see me about?"

"I wanted to ask you some questions."

"My lawyer says I'm not supposed to add anything to what I already said. I don't even *like* that guy."

"Why don't you ask for another lawyer? Ask one of the officers here to call the Legal Aid Society. Or simply tell him. I'm sure he'd have no objection to dropping out."

Corwin shrugged. "I don't want to hurt his feelings. He's a little cockroach, but what the hell."

"You've got a lot at stake here, Corwin."

"But I killed her, so what does it matter *who* the lawyer is? You got it all in black and white."

"You feel like answering some questions?" Carella said.

"I feel like dropping dead, is what I feel like. Cold turkey's never good, and it's worse when you can't yell."

"If you'd rather I came back another time . . ."

"No, no, go ahead. What do you want to know?"

"I want to know exactly how you stabbed Sarah Fletcher."

"How do you *think* you stab somebody? You stick a knife in her."

"Where?"

"In the belly."

"Left-hand side of the body?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Where was the knife when she fell?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Was the knife on the *right*-hand side of her body or the *left*?"

"I don't know. That was when I heard the front door opening and all I could think of was getting out of there."

"When you stabbed her, did she *twist* away from you?"

"No, she backed away, straight back, as if she couldn't believe what I done, and . . . and just wanted to get *away* from me."

"And then she fell?"

"Yes. She . . . her knees sort of gave way and she grabbed for her belly, and her hands sort of—it was terrible—they just . . . they were grabbing *air*, you know? And she fell."

"In what position?"

"On her side."

"Which side?"

"I could still see the knife, so it must've been the opposite side. The side opposite from where I stabbed her."

"One last question, Ralph. Was she dead when you went through that window?"

"I don't know. She was bleeding and . . . she was very quiet. I . . . guess she was dead. I don't know. I guess so."

Among Sarah Fletcher's personal effects that were considered of interest to the police before they arrested Ralph Corwin, was an address book found in the dead woman's handbag on the bedroom dresser. In the Thursday afternoon stillness of the squad room, Carella examined the book.

There was nothing terribly fascinating about the alphabetical listings. Sarah Fletcher had possessed a good handwriting, and most of the listings were obviously married couples (Chuck and Nancy Benton, Harold and Marie Spander, and so on), some were girlfriends, local merchants, hairdresser, dentist, doctors, restaurants in town or across the river. A thoroughly uninspiring address book—until Carella came to a page at the end of the book, with the printed word **MEMORANDA** at its top.

Under the word, there were five names, addresses and telephone numbers written in Sarah's meticulous hand. They were all men's names, obviously entered at different times, because some were in pencil and others in ink. The parenthetical initials following each entry were all noted in felt marking pens of various colors:

Andrew Hart, 1120 Hall Avenue, 622-8400 (PB&G) (TG)

Michael Thornton, 371 South Lindner, 881-9371 (TS)

Lou Kantor, 434 North 16 Street, FR 7-2346 (TPC) (TG)

Sal Decotto, 831 Grover Avenue, FR 5-3287 (F) (TG)

Richard Fenner, 110 Henderson, 593-6648 (QR) (TG)

If there was one thing Carella loved, it was a code. He loved a code almost as much as he loved German measles. He flipped through the

phone book and the address for Andrew Hart matched the one in Sarah's handwriting. He found an address for Michael Thornton. It, too, was identical to the one in her book. He kept turning pages in the directory, checking names and addresses. He verified all five.

At a little past eight the next morning, Carella got going on them. He called Andrew Hart at the number listed in Sarah's address book. Hart answered, and was not happy. "I'm in the middle of shaving," he said. "I've got to leave for the office in a little while. What's this about?"

"We're investigating a homicide, Mr. Hart."

"A *what*? A homicide? Who's been killed?"

"A woman named Sarah Fletcher."

"I don't know anyone named Sarah Fletcher," he said.

"She seems to have known you, Mr. Hart."

"Sarah *who*? Fletcher, did you say?" Hart's annoyance increased.

"That's right."

"I don't know anybody by that name. Who says she knew me? I never heard of her in my life."

"Your name's in her address book."

"*My* name? That's impossible."

Nevertheless, Hart agreed to see Carella and Meyer Meyer at the office of Hart and Widderman, 480 Reed Street, sixth floor, at ten o'clock that morning.

At ten, Meyer and Carella parked the car and went into the building at 480 Reed, and up the elevator to the sixth floor. Hart and Widderman manufactured watchbands. A huge advertising display near the receptionist's desk in the lobby proudly proclaimed "H&W Beats the Band!" and then backed the slogan with more discreet copy that explained how Hart and Widderman had solved the difficult engineering problems of the expansion watch bracelet.

"Mr. Hart, please," Carella said.

"Who's calling?" the receptionist asked. She sounded as if she were chewing gum, even though she was not.

"Detectives Carella and Meyer."

"Just a minute, please," she said, and lifted her phone, pushing a button in the base. "Mr. Hart," she said, "there are some cops here to see you." She listened for a moment and then said, "Yes, sir." She replaced the receiver on its cradle, gestured toward the inside corridor with a nod of her golden tresses, said, "Go right in, please. Door at the

end of the hall," and then went back to her magazine.

The grey skies had apparently infected Andrew Hart. "You didn't have to broadcast to the world that the police department was here," he said immediately.

"We merely announced ourselves," Carella said.

"Well, O.K., now you're here," Hart said, "let's get it over with." He was a big man in his middle fifties, with iron-grey hair and black-rimmed eyeglasses. "I told you I don't know Sarah Fletcher and I don't."

"Here's her book, Mr. Hart," Carella said. "That's your name, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Hart said, and shook his head. "But how it got there is beyond me."

"Is it possible she's someone you met at a party, someone you exchanged numbers with?"

"No."

"Are you married, Mr. Hart?"

"No."

"We've got a picture of Mrs. Fletcher. I wonder—"

"Don't go showing me any pictures of a corpse," Hart said.

"This was taken when she was still very much alive, Mr. Hart."

Meyer handed Carella a manila envelope. He opened the flap and removed from the envelope a framed picture of Sarah Fletcher which he handed to Hart. Hart looked at the photograph, and then immediately looked up at Carella.

"What is this?" he said. He looked at the photograph again, shook his head, and said, "Somebody killed her, huh?"

"Yes, somebody did," Carella answered. "Did you know her?"

"I knew her."

"I thought you said you didn't."

"I didn't know Sarah Fletcher, if that's who you think she was. But I knew *this* broad, all right."

"Who'd *you* think she was?" Meyer asked.

"Just who she told me she was. Sadie Collins. She introduced herself as Sadie Collins, and that's who I knew her as. Sadie Collins."

"Where was this, Mr. Hart? Where'd you meet her?"

"A singles bar. The city's full of them."

"Would you remember when?"

"At least a year ago."

"Ever go out with her?"

"I used to see her once or twice a week."

"When did you stop seeing her?"

"Last summer."

"Did you know she was married?"

"Who, Sadie? You're kidding."

"She never told you she was married?"

"Never."

Meyer asked, "When you were going out, wher'd you pick her up? At her apartment?"

"No. She used to come to my place."

"Where'd you call her when you wanted to reach her?"

"I didn't. She used to call me."

"Where'd you go, Mr. Hart? When you went out?"

"We didn't go out too much."

"What *did* you do?"

"She used to come to my place. The truth is, we never went out. She didn't want to go out much."

"Didn't you think that was strange?"

"No," Hart shrugged. "I figured she liked to stay home."

"Why'd you stop seeing her, Mr. Hart?"

"I met somebody else. A nice girl. I'm very serious about her."

"Was there something wrong with Sadie?"

"No, no. She was a beautiful woman, beautiful."

"Then why would you be ashamed—"

"Ashamed? Who said anything about being ashamed?"

"I gathered you wouldn't want your girl friend—"

"Listen, what *is* this? I stopped seeing Sadie six months ago. I wouldn't even talk to her on the phone after that. If the crazy babe got herself killed—"

"Crazy?"

Hart suddenly wiped his hand over his face, wet his lips, and walked behind his desk. "I don't think I have anything more to say to you gentlemen."

"What did you mean by crazy?" Carella asked.

"Good day, gentlemen," Hart said.

Carella went to see Lieutenant Byrnes. In the lieutenant's corner office, Byrnes and Carella sat down over coffee. Byrnes frowned at Carella's request.

"Oh, come on, Pete!" Carella said. "If Fletcher *did* it—"

"That's only *your* allegation. Suppose he *didn't* do it, and suppose *you* do something to screw up the D.A.'s case?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know like what. The way things are going these days, if you spit on the sidewalk, that's enough to get a case thrown out of court."

"Fletcher hated his wife," Carella said calmly.

"Lots of men hate their wives. Half the men in this city hate their wives."

"But her little fling gives Fletcher a good reason for . . . Look, Pete, he had a motive; he had the opportunity, a golden one, in fact; and he had the means—another man's knife sticking in Sarah's belly. What more do you want?"

"Proof. There's a funny little system we've got here—it requires proof before we can arrest a man and charge him with murder."

"Right. And all I'm asking is the opportunity to *try* for it."

"Sure, by putting a tail on Fletcher. Suppose he sues the city?"

"Yes or no, Pete? I want permission to conduct a round-the-clock surveillance of Gerald Fletcher, starting Sunday morning. Yes or no?"

"I must be out of my mind," Byrnes said, and sighed.

Michael Thornton lived in an apartment building several blocks from the Quarter, close enough to absorb some of its artistic flavor, distant enough to escape its high rents. A blond man in his apartment, Paul Wendling, told Kling and Meyer that Mike was in his jewelry shop.

In the shop, Thornton was wearing a blue work smock, but the contours of the garment did nothing to hide his powerful build. His eyes were blue, his hair black. A small scar showed white in the thick eyebrow over his left eye.

"We understand you're working," Meyer said. "Sorry to break in on you this way."

"That's O.K.," Thornton said. "What's up?"

"You know a woman named Sarah Fletcher?"

"No," Thornton said.

"You know a woman named Sadie Collins?"

Thornton hesitated. "Yes," he said.

"What was your relationship with her?" Kling asked.

Thornton shrugged. "Why? Is she in trouble?"

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"You didn't answer my question," Thornton said.

"Well, you didn't answer ours either," Meyer said, and smiled. "What was your relationship with her, and when did you see her last?"

"I met her in July, in a joint called The Saloon, right around the corner. It's a bar, but they also serve sandwiches and soup. It gets a big crowd on weekends, singles, a couple of odd ones for spice—but not a gay bar. I saw her last in August, a brief, hot thing, and then goodbye."

"Did you realize she was married?" Kling said.

"No. Is she?"

"Yes," Meyer said. Neither of the detectives had yet informed Thornton that the lady in question was now unfortunately deceased. They were saving that for last, like dessert.

"Gee, I didn't know she was married." Thornton seemed truly surprised. "Otherwise, nothing would've happened."

"What *did* happen?"

"I bought her a few drinks and then I took her home with me. Later, I put her in a cab."

"When did you see her next?"

"The following day. It was goofy. She called me in the morning, said she was on her way downtown. I was still in bed. I said, 'So come on down, baby.' And she did. *Believe* me, she did."

"Did you see her again after that?" Kling asked.

"Two or three times a week."

"Where'd you go?"

"To my pad on South Lindner."

"Never went anyplace but there?"

"Never."

"Why'd you quit seeing her?"

"I went out of town for a while. When I got back, I just didn't hear from her again. She never gave me her number, and she wasn't in the directory, so I couldn't reach her."

"What do you make of this?" Kling asked, handing Thornton the address book.

Thornton studied it and said, "Yes, what about it? She wrote this down the night we met—we were in bed; and she asked my address."

"Did she write those initials at the same time, the ones in parentheses under your phone number?"

"I didn't actually see the page itself, I only saw her writing in the book."

"Got any idea what the initials mean?"

"None at all." Suddenly he looked thoughtful. "She *was* kind of special, I have to admit it." He grinned. "She'll call again, I'm sure of it."

"I wouldn't count on it," Meyer said. "She's dead."

His face did not crumble or express grief or shock. The only thing it expressed was sudden anger. "The stupid . . ." Thornton said. "That's all she ever was, a stupid, crazy . . ."

On Sunday morning, Carella was ready to become a surveillant, but Gerald Fletcher was nowhere in sight. A call to his apartment from a nearby phone booth revealed that he was not in his digs. He parked in front of Fletcher's apartment building until five P.M. when he was relieved by Detective Arthur Brown. Carella went home to read his son's latest note to Santa Claus, had dinner with his family, and was settling down in the living room with a novel he had bought a week ago and not yet cracked, when the telephone rang.

"Hello?" Carella said into the mouthpiece.

"Hello, Steve? This is Gerry. Gerry Fletcher."

Carella almost dropped the receiver. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. I was away for the weekend, just got back a little while ago, in fact. Frankly I find this apartment depressing as hell. I was wondering if you'd like to join me for a drink."

"Well," Carella said. "It's Sunday night, and it's late . . ."

"Nonsense, it's only eight o'clock. We'll do a little old-fashioned pub crawling."

It suddenly occurred to Carella that Gerald Fletcher had already had a few drinks before placing his call. It further occurred to him that if he played this *too* cozily, Fletcher might rescind his generous offer.

"Okay. I'll see you at eight-thirty, provided I can square it with my wife."

"Good," Fletcher said. "See you."

Paddy's Bar & Grill was on the Stem, adjacent to the city's theater district. Carella and Fletcher got there at about nine o'clock while the place was still relatively quiet. The action began a little later, Fletcher explained.

Fletcher lifted his glass in a silent toast. "What kind of person would

you say comes to a place like this?"

"I would say we've got a nice lower-middle-class clientele, bent on making contact with members of the opposite sex."

"What would you say if I told you the blonde in the clinging jersey is a working prostitute?"

Carella looked at the woman. "I don't think I'd believe you. She's a bit old for the young competition, and she's not *selling* anything. She's waiting for one of those two or three older guys to make their move. Hookers don't wait, Gerry. *Is* she a working prostitute?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Fletcher said. "I was merely trying to indicate that appearances can sometimes be misleading. Drink up, there are a few more places I'd like to show you."

He knew Fletcher well enough by now to realize that the man was trying to tell him something. At lunch last Tuesday, Fletcher had transmitted a message and a challenge: *I killed my wife, what can you do about it?* Tonight, in a similar manner, he was attempting to indicate something else; but Carella could not fathom exactly what.

Fanny's was only twenty blocks away from Paddy's Bar and Grill, but as far removed from it as the moon. Whereas the first bar seemed to cater to a quiet crowd peacefully pursuing its romantic inclinations, Fanny's was noisy and raucous, jammed to the rafters with men and women of all ages, wearing plastic hippie gear purchased in head shops up and down Jackson Avenue.

Fletcher lifted his glass. "I hope you don't mind if I drink myself into a stupor," he said. "Merely pour me into the car at the end of the night." Fletcher drank. "I don't usually consume this much alcohol, but I'm very troubled about that boy."

"What boy?" Carella asked.

"Ralph Corwin," Fletcher said. "I understand he's having some difficulty with his lawyer and, well, I'd like to help him somehow."

"Help him?"

"Yes. Do you think the D.A.'s office would consider it strange if I suggested a good defense lawyer for the boy?"

"I think they might consider it passing strange, yes."

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm in your voice?"

"Not at all."

Fletcher squired Carella from Fanny's to, in geographical order, The Purple Chairs and Quigley's Rest. Each place was rougher, in its way,

than the last. The Purple Chairs catered to a brazenly gay crowd, and Quigley's Rest was a dive, where Fletcher's liquor caught up with him, and the evening ended suddenly in a brawl. Carella was shaken by the experience, and still couldn't piece out Fletcher's reasons.

Carella received a further shock when he continued to pursue Sarah Fletcher's address book. Lou Kantor was simply the third name in a now wearying list of Sarah's bedmates, until she turned out to be a tough and striking woman. She confirmed Carella's suspicions immediately.

"I only knew her a short while," she said. "I met her in September, I believe. Saw her three or four times after that."

"Where'd you meet her?"

"In a bar called The Purple Chairs. That's right," she added quickly. "That's what I am."

"Nobody asked," Carella said. "What about Sadie Collins?"

"Spell it out, Officer, I'm not going to help you. I don't like being hassled."

"Nobody's hassling you, Miss Kantor. You practice your religion and I'll practice mine. We're here to talk about a dead woman."

"Then talk about her, spit it out. What do you want to know? Was she straight? Everybody's straight until they're *not* straight any more, isn't that right? She was willing to learn. I taught her."

"Did you know she was married?"

"She told me. So what? Broke down in tears one night, and spent the rest of the night crying. I knew she was married."

"What'd she say about her husband?"

"Nothing that surprised me. She said he had another woman. Said he ran off to see her every weekend, told little Sadie he had out-of-town business. *Every* weekend, can you imagine that?"

"What do you make of this?" Carella said, and handed her Sarah's address book, opened to the MEMORANDA page.

"I don't know any of these people," Lou said.

"The initials under your name," Carella said. "TPC and then TG. Got any ideas?"

"Well, the TPC is obvious, isn't it? I met her at The Purple Chairs. What else could it mean?"

Carella suddenly felt very stupid. "Of course. What else could it mean?" He took back the book. "I'm finished," he said. "Thank you very much."

"I miss her," Lou said suddenly. "She was a wild one."

Cracking a code is like learning to roller-skate; once you know how to do it, it's easy. With a little help from Gerald Fletcher, who had provided a guided tour the night before, and a lot of help from Lou Kantor, who had generously provided the key, Carella was able to crack the code wide open—well, almost. Last night, he'd gone with Fletcher to Paddy's Bar and Grill, or PB&G under Andrew Hart's name; Fanny's, F under Sal Decotto; The Purple Chairs, Lou Kantor's TPC; and Quigley's Rest, QR for Richard Fenner on the list. Probably because of the fight, he hadn't taken Carella to The Saloon, TS under Michael Thornton's name—the place where Thornton had admitted first meeting Sarah.

Except, what the hell did TG mean, under all the names but Thornton's?

By Carella's own modest estimate, he had been in more bars in the past twenty-four hours than he had in the past twenty-four years. He decided, nevertheless, to hit The Saloon that night.

The Saloon was just that. A cigarette-scarred bar behind which ran a mottled, flaking mirror; wooden booths with patched, fake leather seat cushions; bowls of pretzels and potato chips; jukebox gurgling; steamy bodies.

"They come in here," the bartender said, "at all hours of the night. Take yourself. You're here to meet a girl, am I right?"

"There *was* someone I was hoping to see. A girl named Sadie Collins. Do you know her?"

"Yeah. She used to come in a lot, but I ain't seen her in months. What do you want to fool around with her for?"

"Why? What's the matter with her?"

"You want to know something?" the bartender said. "I thought she was a hooker at first. Aggressive. You know what that word means? Aggressive? She used to come dressed down to here and up to there, ready for action, selling everything she had, you understand? She'd come in here, pick out a guy she wanted, and go after him like the world was gonna end at midnight. And always the same type. Big guys. You wouldn't stand a chance with her, not that you ain't big, don't misunderstand me. But Sadie liked them gigantic, and mean. You know something?"

"What?"

"I'm glad she don't come in here any more. There was something about

her—like she was compulsive. You know what that word means, compulsive?"

Tuesday afternoon, Arthur Brown handed in his surveillance report on Gerald Fletcher. Much of it was not at all illuminating. From 4:55 P.M. to 8:45 P.M. Fletcher had driven home, and then to 812 North Crane and parked. The report *did* become somewhat illuminating when, at 8:46 P.M., Fletcher emerged from that building with a redhead woman wearing a black fur coat over a green dress. They went to Rudolph's restaurant, ate, and drove back to 812 Crane, arrived at 10:35 P.M. and went inside. Arthur Brown had checked the lobby mailboxes, which showed eight apartments on the eleventh floor, which was where the elevator indicator had stopped. Brown went outside to wait again, and Fletcher emerged alone at 11:40 P.M. and drove home. Detective O'Brien relieved Detective Brown at 12:15 A.M.

Byrnes said, "This woman could be important."

"That's just what I think," Brown answered:

Carella had not yet spoken to either Sal Decotto or Richard Fenner, the two remaining people listed in Sarah's book, but saw no reason to pursue that trail any further. If the place listings in her book had been chronological, she'd gone from bad to worse in her search for partners.

Why? To give it back to her husband in spades? Carella tossed Sarah's little black book into the manila folder bearing the various reports on the case, and turned his attention to the information Artie Brown had brought in last night. The redhead woman's presence might be important, but Carella was still puzzling over Fletcher's behavior. Sarah's blatant infidelity provided Fletcher with a strong motive, so why take Carella to his wife's unhappy haunts, why *show* Carella that he had good and sufficient reason to kill her? Furthermore, why the offer to get a good defense attorney for the boy who had already been indicted for the slaying?

Sometimes Carella wondered who was doing what to whom.

At five o'clock that evening, Carella relieved Detective Hal Willis outside Fletcher's office building downtown, and then followed Fletcher to a department store in midtown Isola. Carella was wearing a false moustache stuck to his upper lip, a wig with hair longer than his own and of a different color, and a pair of sunglasses.

In the department store, he tracked Fletcher to the Intimate Apparel

department. Carella walked into the next aisle, pausing to look at women's robes and kimonos, keeping one eye on Fletcher, who was in conversation with the lingerie salesgirl.

"May I help you, sir?" a voice said, and Carella turned to find a stocky woman at his elbow, with grey hair, black-rimmed spectacles, wearing Army shoes and a black dress. Her suspicious smile accused him of being a junkie shoplifter or worse.

"Thank you, no," Carella said. "I'm just looking."

Fletcher made his selections from the gossamer undergarments which the salesgirl had spread out on the counter, pointing first to one garment, then to another. The salesgirl wrote up the order and Fletcher reached into his wallet to give her either cash or a credit card; it was difficult to tell from an aisle away. He chatted with the girl a moment longer, and then walked off toward the elevator bank.

"Are you *sure* I can't assist you?" the woman in the Army shoes said, and Carella answered, "I'm positive," and moved swiftly toward the lingerie counter. Fletcher had left the counter without a package in his arms, which meant he was *sending* his purchases. The salesgirl was gathering up Fletcher's selections and looked up when Carella reached the counter.

"Yes, sir," she said. "May I help you?"

Carella opened his wallet and produced his shield. "Police officer," he said. "I'm interested in the order you just wrote up."

The girl was perhaps nineteen years old, a college girl working in the store during the Christmas rush. Speechlessly, she studied the shield, eyes bugging.

"Are these items being sent?" Carella asked.

"Yes, sir," the girl said. Her eyes were still wide. She wet her lips and stood up a little straighter, prepared to be a perfect witness.

"Can you tell me where?" Carella asked.

"Yes, sir," she said, and turned the sales slip toward him. "He wanted them wrapped separately, but they're all going to the same address. Miss Arlene Orton, 812 North Crane Street, right here in the city, and I'd guess it's a swell—"

"Thank you very much," Carella said.

It felt like Christmas day already.

The man who picked the lock on Arlene Orton's front door, ten minutes

after she left her apartment on Wednesday morning, was better at it than any burglar in the city, and he happened to work for the Police Department. It took the technician longer to set up his equipment, but the telephone was the easiest of his jobs. The tap would become operative when the telephone company supplied the police with a list of so-called bridging points that located the pairs and cables for Arlene Orton's phone. The monitoring equipment would be hooked into these and whenever a call went out of or came into the apartment, a recorder would automatically tape both ends of the conversation. In addition, whenever a call was made from the apartment, a dial indicator would ink out a series of dots that signified the number being called.

The technician placed his bug in the bookcase on the opposite side of the room. The bug was a small FM transmitter with a battery-powered mike that needed to be changed every twenty-four hours. The technician would have preferred running his own wires, but he dared not ask the building superintendent for an empty closet or workroom in which to hide his listener. A blabbermouth superintendent can kill an investigation more quickly than a squad of gangland goons.

In the rear of a panel truck parked at the curb some twelve feet south of the entrance to 812 North Crane, Steve Carella sat behind the recording equipment that was locked into the frequency of the bug. He sat hopefully, with a tuna sandwich and a bottle of beer, prepared to hear and record any sounds that emanated from Arlene's apartment.

At the bridging point seven blocks away and thirty minutes later, Arthur Brown sat behind equipment that was hooked into the telephone mike, and waited for Arlene Orton's phone to ring. He was in radio contact with Carella.

The first call came at 12:17 P.M. The equipment tripped in automatically and the spools of tape began recording the conversation, while Brown simultaneously monitored it through his headphone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Arlene?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"Nan."

"Nan? You sound so different. Do you have a cold or something?"

"Every year at this time. Just before the holidays. Arlene, I'm terribly rushed, I'll make this short. Do you know Beth's dress size?"

The conversation went on in that vein, and Arlene Orton spoke to

three more girl friends in succession. She then called the local supermarket to order the week's groceries. She had a fine voice, deep and forceful; punctuated every so often (when she was talking to her girl friends) with a delightful giggle.

At four P.M., the telephone in Arlene's apartment rang again.

"Hello?"

"Arlene, this is Gerry."

"Hello, darling."

"I'm leaving here a little early. I thought I'd come right over."

"Good."

"I'll be there in, oh, half an hour, forty minutes."

"Hurry."

Brown radioed Carella at once. Carella thanked him, and sat back to wait.

On Thursday morning, two days before Christmas, Carella sat at his desk in the squad room and looked over the transcripts of the five reels from the night before. The reel that interested him most was the second one. The conversation on that reel had at one point changed abruptly in tone and content. Carella thought he knew why, but he wanted to confirm his suspicion.

Fletcher: I meant after the *holidays*, not the trial.

Miss Orton: I may be able to get away, I'm not sure. I'll have to check with my shrink.

Fletcher: What's he got to do with it?

Miss Orton: Well, I have to pay whether I'm there or not, you know.

Fletcher: Is he taking a vacation?

Miss Orton: I'll ask him.

Fletcher: Yes, ask him. Because I'd really like to get away.

Miss Orton: Ummmm. When do you think the case (inaudible).

Fletcher: In March sometime. No sooner than that. He's got a new lawyer, you know.

Miss Orton: What does that mean, a new lawyer?

Fletcher: Nothing. He'll be convicted anyway.

Miss Orton: (Inaudible).

Fletcher: Because the trial's going to take a lot out of me.

Miss Orton: How soon after the trial . . .

Fletcher: I don't know.

Miss Orton: She's dead, Gerry, I don't see . . .

Fletcher: Yes, but . . .

Miss Orton: I don't see why we have to wait, do you?

Fletcher: Have you read this?

Miss Orton: No, not yet. Gerry, I think we ought to set a date now.

A provisional date, depending on when the trial is. Gerry?

Fletcher: Mmmm?

Miss Orton: Do you think it'll be a terribly long, drawn-out trial?

Fletcher: What?

Miss Orton: Gerry?

Fletcher: Yes?

Miss Orton: Where are you?

Fletcher: I was just looking over some of these books.

Miss Orton: Do you think you can tear yourself away?

Fletcher: Forgive me, darling.

Miss Orton: If the trial starts in March, and we planned on April for it . . .

Fletcher: Unless they come up with something unexpected, of course.

Miss Orton: Like what?

Fletcher: Oh, I don't know. They've got some pretty sharp people investigating this case.

Miss Orton: What's there to investigate?

Fletcher: There's always the possibility he didn't do it.

Miss Orton: (Inaudible) a signed confession?

Fletcher: One of the cops thinks I killed her.

Miss Orton: You're not serious. Who?

Fletcher: A detective named Carella. He probably knows about us by now. He's a very thorough cop. I have a great deal of admiration for him. I wonder if he realizes that.

Miss Orton: Where'd he even get such an idea?

Fletcher: Well, I told him I hated her.

Miss Orton: What? Gerry, why the hell did you do that?

Fletcher: He'd have found out anyway. He probably knows by now that Sarah was sleeping around with half the men in this city. And he probably knows I knew it too.

Miss Orton: Who cares what he found out? Corwin's already confessed.

Fletcher: I can understand his reasoning. I'm just not sure he can understand mine.

Miss Orton: Some reasoning. If you were going to kill her, you'd have done it ages ago, when she refused to sign the separation papers. So let him investigate, who cares? Wishing your wife dead isn't the same thing as killing her. Tell that to Detective Copolla.

Fletcher: Carella. (Laughs). I'll tell him, darling.

According to the technician who had wired the Orton apartment, the living room bug was in the bookcase on the wall opposite the bar. Carella was interested in the tape from the time Fletcher had asked Arlene about a book—"Have you read this?"—and then seemed preoccupied. It was Carella's guess that Fletcher had discovered the bookcase bug. What interested Carella more, however, was what Fletcher had said *after* he knew the place was wired. Certain of an audience now, Fletcher had:

- (1) Suggested the possibility that Corwin was not guilty.
- (2) Flatly stated that a cop named Carella suspected him.
- (3) Expressed admiration for Carella, while wondering if Carella was aware of it.
- (4) Speculated that Carella had already doped out the purpose of the bar-crawling last Sunday night, was cognizant of Sarah's promiscuity, and knew Fletcher was aware of it.
- (5) Made a little joke about "telling" Carella.

Carella felt as eerie as he had when lunching with Fletcher and later when drinking with him. Now he'd spoken, through the bug, directly to Carella. But what was he trying to say? And why?

Carella wanted very much to hear what Fletcher would say when he *didn't* know he was being overheard. He asked Lieutenant Byrnes for permission to request a court order to put a bug in Fletcher's automobile. Byrnes granted permission, and the court issued the order.

Fletcher made a date with Arlene Orton to go to The Chandeliers across the river, and the bug was installed in Fletcher's 1972 car. If Fletcher left the city, the effective range of the transmitter on the open road would be about a quarter of a mile. The listener-pursuer had his work cut out for him.

By ten minutes to ten that night, Carella was drowsy and discouraged. On the way out to The Chandeliers, Fletcher and Arlene had not once mentioned Sarah nor the plans for their impending marriage. Carella was anxious to put them both to bed and get home to his family. When they

finally came out of the restaurant and began walking toward Fletcher's automobile, Carella actually uttered an audible, "At last," and started his car.

They proceeded east on Route 701, heading for the bridge, and said nothing. Carella thought at first that something was wrong with the equipment, then finally Arlene spoke and Carella knew just what had happened. The pair had argued in the restaurant, and Arlene had been smoldering until this moment.

"Maybe you don't want to marry me at all," she shouted.

"That's ridiculous," Fletcher said.

"Then why won't you set a date?"

"I have set a date."

"You haven't set a date: All you've done is say after the trial. *When*, after the trial? Maybe this whole damn thing has been a stall. Maybe you never planned to marry me."

"You know that isn't true, Arlene."

"How do I know there really *were* separation papers?"

"There were. I told you there were."

"Then why wouldn't she sign them?"

"Because she loved me."

"If she loved you, then why did she do those horrible things?"

"To make me pay, I think."

"Is that why she showed you her little black book?"

"Yes, to make me pay."

"No. Because she was a slut."

"I guess. I guess that's what she became."

"Putting a little TG in her book every time she told you about a new one. *Told Gerry*, and marked a little TG in her book."

"Yes, to make me pay."

"A slut. You should have gone after her with detectives. Gotten pictures, threatened her, forced her to sign—"

"No, I couldn't have done that. It would have ruined me, Arl."

"Your precious career."

"Yes, my precious career."

They both fell silent again. They were approaching the bridge now. Carella tried to stay close behind them, but on occasion the distance between the two cars lengthened and he lost some words in the conversation.

"She wouldn't sign the papers and I (. . .) adultery because (. . .) have come out."

"And I thought (. . .)."

"I did everything I possibly could."

"Yes, Gerry, but now she's dead. So what's your excuse now?"

"I'm suspected of having *killed* her, damn it!"

Fletcher was making a left turn, off the highway. Carella stepped on the accelerator, not wanting to lose voice contact now.

"What difference does that make?" Arlene asked.

"None at all, I'm sure," Fletcher said. "I'm sure you wouldn't mind at all being married to a convicted murderer."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the possibility . . . Never mind."

"Let me hear it."

"All right, Arlene. I'm talking about the possibility of someone accusing me of the murder. And of my having to stand trial for it."

"That's the most paranoid—"

"It's not paranoid."

"Then what is it? They've caught the murderer, they—"

"I'm only saying suppose. How could we get married if I killed her, if someone says I killed her?"

"No one has said that, Gerry."

"Well, if someone should."

Silence. Carella was dangerously close to Fletcher's car now, and risking discovery.

Carella held his breath and stayed glued to the car ahead.

"Gerry, I don't understand this," Arlene said, her voice low.

"Someone could make a good case for it."

"Why would anyone do that? They know that Corwin—"

"They could say I came into the apartment and . . . They could say she was still alive when I came into the apartment. They could say the knife was still in her and I . . . I came in and found her that way and . . . finished her off."

"Why would you do that?"

"To end it."

"You wouldn't kill anyone, Gerry."

"No."

"Then why are you even suggesting such a terrible thing?"

"If she wanted it . . . If someone accused me . . . If someone said I'd done it . . . that I'd finished the job, pulled the knife across her belly, they could claim she *asked* me to do it."

"What are you saying, Gerry?"

"I'm trying to explain that Sarah might have—"

"Gerry, I don't think I want to know."

"I'm only trying to tell you—"

"No, I don't want to know. Please, Gerry, you're frightening me."

"Listen to me, damn it! I'm trying to explain what *might* have happened. Is that so hard to accept? That she might have *asked* me to kill her?"

"Gerry, please, I—"

"I *wanted* to call the hospital, I was *ready* to call the hospital, don't you think I could *see* she wasn't fatally stabbed?"

"Gerry, please."

"She begged me to kill her, Arlene, she begged me to end it for her, she . . . Damn it, can't *either* of you understand that? I tried to show him, I took him to all the places, I thought he was a man who'd understand. Is it that difficult?"

"Oh, my God, *did* you kill her? *Did* you kill Sarah?"

"No. Not Sarah. Only the woman she'd become, the slut I'd forced her to become. She was Sadie, you see, when I killed her—when she died."

"Oh, my God," Arlene said, and Carella nodded in weary acceptance.

Carella felt neither elated nor triumphant. As he followed Fletcher's car into the curb in front of Arlene's building, he experienced only a familiar nagging sense of repetition and despair. Fletcher was coming out of his car now, walking around to the curb side, opening the door for Arlene, who took his hand and stepped onto the sidewalk, weeping. Carella intercepted them before they reached the front door of the building.

Quietly, he charged Fletcher with the murder of his wife, and made the arrest without resistance.

Fletcher did not seem at all surprised.

So it was finished, or at least Carella thought it was.

In the silence of his living room, the telephone rang at a quarter past one.

He caught the phone on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Steve," Lieutenant Byrnes said. "I just got a call from Calcutta. Ralph Corwin hanged himself in his cell, just after midnight. Must have done it while we were still taking Fletcher's confession in the squad room."

Carella was silent.

"Steve?" Byrnes said.

"Yeah, Pete."

"Nothing," Byrnes said, and hung up.

Carella stood with the dead phone in his hands for several seconds and then replaced it on the hook. He looked into the living room, where the lights of the tree glowed warmly, and thought of a despairing junkie in a prison cell, who had taken his own life without ever having known he had not taken the life of another.

It was Christmas day.

Sometimes none of it made any sense at all.



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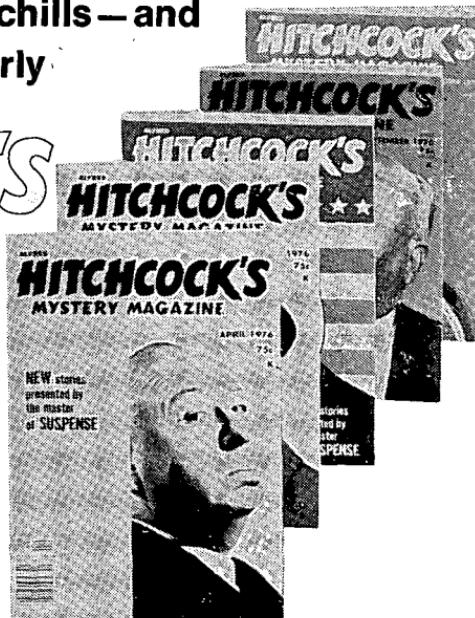
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